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# RUFFINO

*&c.*

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RUFFINO





## *RUFFINO*

### I

A SERVANT brought a telegraphic despatch and handed it over Ruffino's head to his master.

Ruffino disliked the look of telegrams. The arrival of one was always associated in his mind with rapid journeys, hasty exits, inconvenient arrivals, or unexpected departures, and also, generally speaking, with ladies. Ruffino held women in profound scorn and abhorrence: they caressed and cajoled him in vain; he showed them his little white teeth, and was adamant beneath their blandishments. They absorbed and monopolised his master, and he considered his master his own property. In Ruffino's estimation, a man does not own a dog; the dog owns the man.

Ruffino was a little Pomeranian dog with a small black nose, and large black eyes, and a ruff as wide and imposing as Queen Elizabeth's. He wore round

his neck a gold *porte bonheur* with little silver bells which made music as he moved. He was six years old, and was gifted with very strong opinions, a very marked character, and a very high spirit. From the first weeks of his puppyhood he had belonged to the Duke of Castiglione, having been born in Rome of parents who belonged to a cabstand. The fact of the cabstand, and of another humiliating fact, that he would have been drowned in the Tiber at a month old had not his present master rescued him from the hands of brutal boys, did not, however, militate in any way against the patrician pride of Ruffino, which was great, and his inborn certainty that he had been created to rule the universe: a conviction which was never disturbed in its complacency for a moment, although occasionally disputed by other dogs of similar pretensions.

Ruffino now eyed the telegram askance. It was from Rome, and contained a pressing invitation to return there, stating that the Prince of Montefeltro had been taken dangerously ill. The Prince of Montefeltro was the father of the young duke who owned, or was owned by, Ruffino.

‘The presence of your Excellency in Rome is urgently requested, as His Most Illustrious the Prince, your father, is in danger of his life.’

So said the despatch, which was signed Magliabecchi Filippo and Gerini Antonio.

The recipient of the despatch knew the senders of it: the Doctor Magliabecchi had been physician to the household, and Don Antonio had been the private chaplain and confessor of the Prince, for forty years; and he knew that these two worthies were quite capable of exaggerating or distorting any fact, or facts, if it suited their purpose to do so. So he telegraphed to a friend whom he could trust, a cousin who was on duty at the Vatican, to inquire if it were true that his father was in any peril of his life; and in a few hours the Captain of the Pontifical Guard replied:

‘Yes; he is in danger: you should come at once.’

Thus, there was no choice but to obey, and leave the cool gardens of his charming and shady country-house on the borders of the forest, his horses and his mail-coach, and his multitude of friends, and all the pretty women who made Baden Baden at that season delightful to him; and by the night express he was travelling towards Rome accompanied only by his valet Saverio and his companion Ruffino, neither of whom ever left him wherever he went.

Ruffino's master (or slave) was by name and titles Don Ezzelino Lanfredi, Duke of Castiglione, Marquis of Vivaldo, and Count of Leonessa; he was the only son of the Prince of Montefeltro: and although there had been no great love ever felt between him and his father, he could not in decency remain absent in the pursuit of pleasure when the old man lay in peril of his life.

He was a handsome and graceful person, thirty-three years old, an accomplished man of the world, and very popular with women and with men; he was generous, good-natured, and imaginative, selfish from habit, but kind from instinct; all the ways and customs and qualities and prejudices of the old Prince were odious to him, and he and his father had no single sentiment or opinion in common.

'He would rejoice to disinherit me, if he could,' thought Castiglione, as the train vibrated and oscillated over the iron lines traversing the deep woods of the Swabian alb while the pale dawn broke.

Ruffino was lying curled up near him, and ever and anon lifted his little delicate nose and his furry, erect ears, to peer out into the night. When the train stopped to take in water at a small station under the shadow of oak-clothed hills, and a few peasants came to the door of the carriage to offer their little ivory



and bone toys, carved in their long winter evenings, Ruffino barked angrily; what should he and his master want with those trumpery trifles? If they had been bones to eat, indeed, there might have been some sense in them.

'You are not kind, Ruffino,' said Castiglione, and he threw some silver coins out amongst the poor people.

Ruffino sniffed scornfully, and doubled himself up again; he disliked the train; he could never imagine why people ever travelled. When you were well enough where you were, had soft things to lie on, plenty to eat, and a roof over your head, what could you want to change your place for, and racket about from one end of the earth to the other? Ruffino had had a great deal of travelling since his puppyhood, and it had bored him. Just as he had got the topography of a place well into his mind, and had established tender relations with interesting canine beauties, it always seemed to him that he was whisked off, senselessly, to some other locality, in the pursuit of what his owner thought pleasure. But, on the other hand, he would not have had a moment's peace if his master had gone anywhere without him: unless a dog looks sharply after him, a man always gets into mischief, or at least Ruffino thought so;

and if these continual changes of place made him a little heartless and *volage*, they also contributed considerably to the polishing of his wits and the increase of his experience.

Ruffino knew Rome very well, as he knew most European capitals, and yawned when he saw the approach to it; it was a city he thought poorly of: he preferred Baden, or Homburg, or Monte Carlo, or any green place, and as his fur coat was very thick and warm, he only really liked low latitudes and north winds. Rome was his birthplace, but he had never been able to comprehend how his race, with their double coat of long hair, and short hair underneath, ever became natives of a hot country like Italy; yet it was quite certain that natives they had been for a vast number of centuries, and had been even cruelly honoured by being sacrificed to Flora in the remote days of the old Latin gods, at least, if those classic writers whom his master thought so much of spoke the truth about anything, which was doubtful.

‘Here we are, Ruffino,’ said his master, with a restless sigh of despondency and irritation, as they drove through one of the steep and narrow ways of Trastevere, and between the open iron gates of a fortress-like palace, over whose huge stone walls hung clusters of roses and long boughs of jessamine,



with the branches of orange-trees and the green plumes of palms rising above them.

The Montefeltro palace was one of the grandest and most famous, both for architecture and art, in all the Leonine city.

‘How is my father?’ asked Castiglione of the major-domo, who advanced with obsequious genuflexions from the bowing crowd of servants.

‘His Excellency is in the same state, neither worse nor better, most illustrious lord,’ replied the functionary, bending his back in two, and forcing tears from his two small, bead-like eyes, and spreading out his hands in a pantomime of woe.

‘But what is his illness?’

‘A stroke!’ murmured the official.

‘Ah! Paralysis? Apoplexy?’

‘Hemiplegia.’

‘Is he conscious? Does he speak?’

‘Alas! no.’

‘Send the doctors to me in my apartments.’

Followed by Ruffino, ringing his little bells, he went to the right wing of the great house, which was always set aside for his use.

It was three years since he had set foot in it. It had been opened and aired, but the blinds of all the west windows were down; it was dusky and gloomy,

and had a scent of faded flowers, of evaporated perfumes; such a faint fragrance as old laces and old tapestries have about them: Coming into these enormous and shadowy apartments from the heat and sunshine of the Roman streets was like coming into a crypt where the dead were buried. Castiglione, easily impressed, gave a sigh and a little shudder: Ruffino coughed discreetly, as his habit was when he disapproved anything; some of the dust off the mosaic floors had got up his nostrils, and he was thinking of the merry green woods of Baden, and of Elsa, a white dog from Thuringia, who lived there, and with whom he had left as much of his heart as could possibly be taken from his master and himself.

The worthy doctors, summoned to the presence of the heir, confirmed the statements of the major-domo, and lost themselves, as doctors love to do, in endless mazes of technical conjecture and suggestion: they were pompous, servile, verbose, important, and wore sombre, melancholy countenances, as beseemed quacks who were beholding their patron and protector perish.

From their wordy descriptions Castiglione gathered that his father had had a fit whilst playing cards with the chaplain, was not conscious, might die at any moment, or might, on the other hand,

linger on in his present comatose state for days, weeks, and even months. The Prince of Montefeltro was over seventy years of age.

‘I will see him at once,’ said his son; and he took his way across the great palace of his ancestors to the chamber where the old prince was lying.

These apartments were on the first floor, and, immense, sombre, darkened, and hushed, were melancholy as a grave. Ruffino, depressed by the gloom and the scent in the air of medicines and disinfectants, sidled in after his master, making himself very small to escape notice, and wearing his tail down in decorous sympathy of woe. A smothered growl escaped him, however, hatred being stronger than discretion, as he passed Magliabecchi. Magliabecchi had once administered oil to him, and Ruffino kept a vigilant eye upon the doctor’s ankles; sooner or later he meant to be even with his enemy, and wash out the affront. True, he had swallowed none of it, having violently resisted the dose, and succeeded in scattering it over his own ruff and the shirt-front of the offender; but he had never forgiven the attempt to force the oil down him. Besides, Ruffino knew a rogue, as he knew a rat, by the scent of the animal; and Magliabecchi was written down in his shrewd little mind as a very great rascal indeed.

The old Prince lay in his vast state bed, with its canopy above him of purple velvet, heavily fringed with bullion fringes, and surmounted by a gold crown ; a bed three centuries old, if one, with a gilded estrade before it, and beside it a purple carpet powdered with golden roses, the device of the House of Montefeltro. He had been a handsome man in his day, but he was now lean, and haggard, and white-haired ; his bony hands were clenched hard upon the coverlet, and his rigid face, in its stupefied, sullen unconsciousness, wore a look of stern and bitter hatred. The eyelids were closed, and nothing but the painful and stertorous breathing gave any sign of life. So he had lain for three days, so he might lie for three months ; or he might draw his last breath that night : no one could tell.

Castiglione knelt down by the side of the bed and made the sign of the cross. He and his father had parted in deep anger and offence two years before, and there had never at any time been any affection between them ; but the sight of the haughty, imperious, and tyrannical man reduced to that state of speechless, helpless, corpse-like coma, stirred the soul of his son to pity and emotion. The tears rose to his eyes, and he murmured a Latin prayer which had never been on his lips since boyhood.

He needed to ask nothing more : he knew death when he saw it, and he knew that he saw it then.

‘If his most Illustrious had not had a marvellous constitution, he would not have lingered so long even thus,’ whispered the dulcet voice of Magliabecchi.

Castiglione silenced him with a gesture. The remark, inoffensive though it was, grated on him.

The spectacle of this terrible old man, who had ruled his household with a rod of iron, and lived like a despot of the Rome of Giulio II. or Leone X., struck down thus, impotent to scare away a fly or lift a glass of water, keenly affected the careless, but tender and impressionable, nature of his heir.

‘We are consoled by the remembrance of his sainted past,’ said the chaplain, with unctuous drawl ; ‘the Church has seldom had a truer or more devoted son. Though he pass from this life to the next in utter unconsciousness, yet, Sir, may we be sure of the celestial rewards which will await your most august and revered progenitor.’

Castiglione, from decency, abstained from reply, and made the sign of the cross mechanically. But in himself he thought of the many scenes of savage, causeless jealousy by which his mother’s life had been embittered ; of the ten thousand petty mean-



nesses to tenants and dependents of which the princely giver to the Church had been capable; of the harsh, grinding tyranny, the narrow, joyless egotism, the fierce, ungoverned temper, the paltry and harassing suspicions, all the egotism and all the violence of which his father had been guilty—and it seemed to him that the balance of justice, whether held by the hand of man or of God, was faulty.

If any vague, dim glimmerings of repentance were now passing through that dulled brain, of what worth were they? What compensation would they be to all those whom in their lives he had oppressed and tortured?

Où donc le trouves-tu, ce Redresseur Éternel?

Castiglione asked himself the question of Beaudelaire again and again, and could neither obtain or divine an answer.

The hour of fate had struck, indeed; impending death had descended on the scheming, unmerciful brain and on the cold, hard heart, and had put an end to tyranny, and rapacity, and will, and suspicion, and all which had made up the essence of their life. But those who had been tormented and harassed by these so many years—what compensation had they?

Some deeds done might be in a manner undone; some victim might, if tardily, be sought out and

atoned to: and he promised himself that he would do this as far as it should be in his power. But this could only be possible in a limited degree; his father was an old man, and had a long past lying behind him. Much of the evil wrought must remain evil for ever; and was it balanced by the jewelled chasuble, the pyx of gold and silver, the enamelled reliquary, or the embroidered Madonna's robe which the dying Lord of Montefeltro had bestowed so liberally on church and chapel, oratory and monastery, through so long a life?

## II

HE could not shake off that heavy sense of awfulness and dread when he had left the sick-room and returned to his own side of the palace, where the glass doors had been opened to the evening air, and to the grand loggia, with its colonnades, and arches, and sweeping marble staircases, and colossal statues of Greek and Latin gods and demi-gods.

This wing of the house had been set aside at her marriage for the use of the Princess of Montefeltro, and in his childhood Castiglione's feet had pattered merrily on those black and white squares of marble, whilst she had stood by, under the foliage of the



climbing roses, smiling, and calling to him. She had been a lovely, gentle, and very unhappy woman, and her memory endeared to him those lofty and noble arcades, those frescoed and rose-hung walls.

When he thought of her, his heart hardened more against the cruel old man, to whom he had felt a momentary relenting. Were a few days, a few weeks, of paralysed stupor, punishment enough for a long life of violence, harshness, selfishness, and bigotry?

It was half-past nine by the clock, the third hour of the night, as they still say in Rome, when he sat down to his solitary dinner. The great casements stood wide open to the night. Beyond them was the loggia, with its high arches and columns, and pavement of black and white marbles. Beyond that were the gardens. This part of the palace was as quiet as though it had been a hut on the Sabine Mountains. The house had been planned and built by Michel-angiolo: its ceilings and frescoed walls had been painted by Giulio Romano; where frescoes were not, there were tapestries. Its proportions were of that vastness, grandeur, and nobility, of which the whole secret seems lost to modern architects; and within its chambers and its galleries were treasures of art only

surpassed by those of its neighbour, the Vatican, which huge pile towered, like the stone form of some fossilised mastodon, beyond the masses of the ilex woods of the gardens.

All these things would be entirely his in a brief space, perhaps only of hours : it was one of those princely heritages, of which Rome can still boast, richer in art than any other in the world, and he, who had a fine natural taste, cultivated by the friendships he had made with scholars and artists, brought to it an intelligence and reverent appreciation of which his immediate predecessors had been incapable. His father had kept everything sacred and untouched, because he would have considered it degradation to sell a stick or stone ; but all the splendours around him had said nothing to his soul or mind. To those of his son they said much ; he was not only a man of pleasure : he was also a connoisseur and a student.

When he found himself once more in this palace, which had been his birthplace, its solemnity and noble splendour made the luxury of his Paris house and the gaiety of his Baden pavilion seem mere vulgar, meretricious rubbish.

‘ Those giants of the past had the secret of greatness in all they touched,’ he thought as, after a dinner

which he had scarcely appreciated, he walked out on to the loggia in the soft, luminous night air.

The terrace, with its covered colonnade, ran the whole length of this side of the palace; it was of much the same proportions as is the Loggia dei Lanzi of Florence, and its wide, high archways spanned nobly the deep blue sky, where the stars were trembling, and a slender, crescent moon had arisen. Across the dark leafy masses of the Montefeltro gardens there towered the mighty roofs of the Vatican and the dome of St. Peter's.

'There is no other such scene in Europe for romantic beauty and for historical association,' he thought, as he drew one of the lounging-chairs to the edge of the wide flight of marble stairs which shelved downwards into the leafy, shadowy mazes of the gardens.

Ruffino seated himself also, and with pricked ears gazed down into the dusky depths of foliage; surely there were rats or cats underneath it?

His master lighted a cigarette, and leaned his head back against the cane of his chair: all the serene and brilliant loveliness of the evening could not dissipate the sense of melancholy and oppression which had settled on him since his visit to his father's room. Grey owls flew softly by, with deep

and mellow hoot; from the rose-thickets beneath him nightingales were singing in amorous riot and rivalry; the fresh sound of fountains, falling and splashing into marble basins, was musical on the air; in the semi-darkness the white bells of flowering yuccas, the sceptres of lilies, the garlands of tea-roses, were visible under the tangle of leaves.

Castiglione yawned, and then sighed, as the perfume and melody of the night were wafted to him. It was an hour and a scene which wanted a Juliet leaning there over the marble balustrade; a Francesca passing to her tryst with swift, noiseless, bare feet adown the moonlit stair; a Ginevra creeping timidly, yet with hope, to the only heart which death had no power to chill. And he was alone: he was unused to be alone; his solitude spoilt to him the glory of the night; he was tired, depressed, melancholy.

The grave makes all anger seem a poor and childish fault. His conscience was not heavily burdened. The blame of their disaccord lay more with his father than himself. He had defended his mother in his childhood and boyhood, and hence there had been ill-blood between Montefeltro and himself ever afterwards. But he had done and said nothing for which he could in justice have been



blamed. Yet he knew that in Roman society he was regarded as an irreverent and unnatural son, and the lean, hard, sightless face of the old man, with its cruel jaw shut tight like a steel trap, haunted him painfully; if only he would recover consciousness, and say some kind word in farewell!

Between the Lord of Montefeltro and his heir there had always been coldness, and often feud: the son had never rendered to the father that blind, docile deference and obedience which are usual in filial relations in Italian aristocratic families, and the old man had never ceased imperiously to expect and to demand them from him. He had French and English blood in him through his mother; he had, also, through her a large private fortune, which made him altogether independent of other wealth. His mother had now been dead many years, but he had idolised her in boyhood, and had never pardoned to his father the wrongs and the sorrows which she had endured in life. He had taken his own way, and made his own relations, and passed his existence chiefly out of Italy; to Montefeltro he had always seemed degenerate, insubordinate, capricious, fanciful, foreign, intolerable. But he was the only son, the inevitable heir. The old Prince had hated him, but he had been unable to disinherit him: he had tormented

him as much as he had it in his power to do ; but Castiglione was rich, and could live his own life, and could afford to disregard alike censure and criticism.

Montefeltro had been a fierce Churchman and a bigot : his palace had never been open to any festivity, unless it were some solemn banquet or reception at which the cardinals were present in all their crimson magnificence. His son, who had the views of a man of the world, was in his sight an unbeliever, beyond all pale of salvation. All the habits, preferences, and opinions of the younger man were odious to him, and abominable ; and the gay and easy temper, the luxurious ways, and the wide and liberal views, of Castiglione, were in the strongest and most abhorred contrast to all his own ideas and tendencies.

When the latter had attained his thirtieth year a climax had been reached in their disunion which had made all mediation and concession impossible between them : he had refused to enter into an alliance with a daughter of another great Roman family, and the old man had furiously forbidden him ever to enter his sight. The marriage was a perfect one in Montefeltro's sight ; was beyond all others to be coveted, to be secured, to be adored ; but his son did not see it

in the same light, and had refused to ratify the engagement, which had been entered into unknown to him.

‘Go, with my curse upon you ! stay with your mother’s people ; waste your days in foolish pleasures, and with singing women, and French jesters, and playwrights, and scribblers ; never blast my eyes with the sight of you as long as you live !’ the furious old man had cried, in his rage at his defeated projects ; and Castiglione had answered not a syllable, but had left Rome that day, and had stayed away from it entirely for three years, until now, when the tidings of the Prince’s seizure had enforced his return, against his wishes.

It was eleven in the evening, and the sweet scent of a million blowing roses and orange-blossoms was wafted in from the gardens beyond.

‘Death is an ugly thing, Ruffino,’ he said to the little dog, who jumped on his knee and touched his cheek with a little moist black nose.

Ruffino could not pretend to be personally sorry for the dying Prince, who had never said a kind word to him, and whose observation he had learned carefully to avoid by hiding under a sofa or a chair ; but he was sorry that his master was sorry, which came to exactly the same thing.



‘Death is an ugly thing, Ruffino,’ Castiglione said again to his little furry friend.

Discordant noises at that moment irritated his ear, and jangled harshly on the sweetness of the falling waters, the singing nightingales, the plaintive, mourning owls. Ruffino barked; he always conceived it to be his paramount duty to add his quota to any noise that he might ever hear.

‘It is that beastly lane,’ thought Castiglione; ‘the first thing I will do is to compensate the people, send them elsewhere, and knock the whole place down.’

He rose, walked the length of the loggia, and looked out over the balustrade which closed the western end; on this side both the loggia and the palace alike looked down on a miserable little street called in the Roman vernacular the *Viccolo* of S. Anastasia.

On its front the house looked on its own piazza, wide and fine; on the back and on the left it was entirely surrounded and shut in by its own gardens; but on the right it was bordered by this steep, narrow, densely-populated little lane, which Montefeltro had always desired to purchase and destroy, but of which the price had been too great not to affright his avarice.

The mighty walls of the palace, and the bastion supporting the loggia, shelved down into this little lane like a great cliff hemming in a brook ; and the tenements composing it were crowded, filthy, and wholly unfit to be the neighbours of this stately residence. They had scarcely even the attraction of age, as age is counted in the Trastevere ; for they had been originally stables, turned into dwelling-places gradually in the beginning of the eighteenth century, and allowed to remain there by the carelessness of the Montefeltro of that time ; they now belonged to a syndicate of Jews, and the price they put on them had been too enormous for the present Prince to be willing to pay it for a mere artistic whim.

To Castiglione, whose æsthetic feeling was much more delicate and keen, the neighbourhood of that crowded and foul-smelling passage beneath his walls had always been an eyesore and an unendurable offence.

‘ I will give the Jews whatever they want for it, and I will have it all knocked down and cleared away,’ he thought now, as he gazed down over the wall, where the creamy white of the climbing noisette roses was like the surf of a sea.

Ruffino had thrust his little muzzle through the

foliage, and was growling ; he smelt cats : he could not see them, but he smelt them ; and he could never understand why cats, rats, and doctors had ever been allowed to live by a too patient human race. Ruffino would have made short work of all three species could he have had his way.

Castiglione could see what offended him as much as the cats did Ruffino : he could see dirt, rags, squalor ; open sheds, where lean mules lay on reeking straw ; tattered clothes, which hung to dry on iron spikes ; baskets of half-rotting vegetables ; pans of charcoal, with other pans simmering on the top of them, full of beans, or paste, or little fish ; children with naked limbs and unkempt hair, and mothers, dishevelled and ragged, screaming in their ears ; petroleum lamps blazing, with foul smell, above wretched interiors : and yet these people were everywhere shouting, making merry, enjoying life in their nakedness and dirt ; a girl was dancing a tarantella with a youth upon the stones, another was thrumming a mandoline ; little half-nude boys were jumping about ; an old beggar was shouting a popular song. A stranger contrast to the beautiful serenity of the nightingale-haunted, fountain-filled, moonlighted gardens, and the grandeur of the silent palace, could hardly have been found in all the world.

‘After all, the poor have lighter hearts than we,’ thought the young Duke, as he stood above, amidst his myrtle and jessamine blossoms, and the tea-rose foliage. ‘They laugh and sing and dance, though they lie six together in one bed, and gnaw rotten melons and stinking fish, and are swept away when the cholera comes, as the tunny are swept into the nets at sea.’

‘Wuff, wuff!’ said Ruffino, with feverish excitement: he had seen a yellow-striped cat creeping stealthily along the roof of a house immediately in front of the loggia. He beheld her, he was within a yard of her, and yet he could not reach her! He ran to and fro like a little maniac, barking, growling, agitating his tail, making springs in all directions except in the one which would have landed him in the street below; for in his many travels Ruffino had learned to exercise extreme discretion in the care of his own person. The cat, undisturbed, went crawling on her placid way over the roof and disappeared; and on her disappearance Ruffino shook the universe with volley on volley of infuriated barks. Was there ever a dog thus insulted before his face?

The roof over which the offending animal had passed was a low roof of old, red tiles, exactly facing



that end of the loggia on which Ruffino and his master were standing. It belonged to a little building which had been there for several centuries, and was as superior in solidity and structure to the eighteenth-century work as eighteenth-century work is superior to the work of to-day. It was a very low cottage of two storeys, and the top storey was on a level with the floor of the loggia; it ended the lane with a tall, ancient stone chimney, and joined the dead-wall of a convent of the nuns of the *Sepolte Vive*. It was a quaint old place, like a house in the engravings of the Middle Ages, and on the side of the old, disused chimney grew wall-flowers and valerian, dragon's-mouth and Madonna's herb, lichens and green mosses; and it was so close to the balustrade of the palace gardens that the boughs of the rose-trees and the garlands of the wisteria, when a high wind blew them outward, touched its modest red-tiled roof.

Although the several habitations in the lane belonged to a number of Jews, ostensibly very poor, in reality very rich, and avaricious in proportion to their wealth, this quaint little dwelling at the end, abutting on the convent, belonged to a widow-woman who sold vegetables, brooms, and charcoal, on the ground-floor of it; a big-boned, loud-voiced, Roman

matron, with brawny muscles and a brown skin, who had passed her life in that angle between the garden and the convent wall, and knew how to scream at a debtor and cringe to a creditor, to pass off stale marrows and melons, and make her charcoal-scales tell false weights, as well as any vendor in the city. The three small chambers above her shop she let, whenever she could, to any unfortunates whom poverty might compel to seek those sorry lodgings.

As Castiglione was now placed, a little higher than the casements of the opposite cottage, and not more than three feet away from them, he could see straight into the little room under the eaves. It was almost bare of furniture, but was singularly clean, and in strong contrast with its neighbourhood : a deal table and deal chairs, with a press of ash wood, were all it contained. In the next room was a small bed, and a chest of drawers with an old Venetian mirror and a dark picture of the Madonna and Child ; there were also a big wooden tub and a copper pitcher. Nothing else. On the window-sill was a plant of red geranium and another of balsam. It was the abode of poverty, but it was neat and wholesome-looking as any shore-pebble washed daily by the tide of the sea. In contrast to the disorder, dirt, and unspeakable nastiness of the neighbouring interiors, it seemed like a miracle in



such a place. The two small casements of the upper storey were open, and there was a light burning; a single wick, lit in a three-wicked brass lamp such as Italians who cling to old ways still use. By the light of it, a girl was sewing linen; the star of flame illuminated faintly her face and hands, and left all the rest of the little chamber in which she sat in darkness. When Ruffino barked, she looked up; but she saw nothing except the dense foliage of the Canadian vine round one of the loggia-columns, and she resumed her work.

‘She is a handsome child,’ thought Castiglione, whose taste in women’s beauty was cultured and exacting. She was young, apparently very young, and was curiously like the portrait of Beatrice Cenci, so far as he could distinguish her features by the flickering reflection of the wick burning in front of her. She was very poorly clad in cotton, but she looked unlike the other dwellers in the lane. He stood still and watched her for some time; whilst Ruffino, calming down from his indignation, sat, with twitching ears, peering as far as he could into the street and its ways, where everything appeared to him to call for an interference and assistance and correction which he was too remote to be able to render.

The street interested him : he preferred sitting here, where he could see it, to sitting above the great, white, solemn stairs which led to nothing but turf and leaves and flowers, and where the most to be hoped for, in the way of excitement, was a field-mouse or a cricket.

It interested also his master since he had seen this vision of auburn Cenci-like hair, and great, pathetic, brown eyes, like those of the hapless Beatrice.

She was a poor girl, no doubt, working for her livelihood ; but she had a spiritual and uncommon beauty, and her hands, as they moved, were small and delicate, and so thin that they seemed scarcely made of flesh and bone.

Standing above, amongst the noisette roses, he spoke to her courteously and kindly.

‘I see you look up at my flowers,’ he said, as he leaned over the marble balustrade. ‘If you will come in, and gather some, you will be heartily welcome. Shall I open the postern-door for you?’

It was the careless, good-natured, free-and-easy address of a great gentleman to one who could not fail to be pleased and flattered by his notice. His amazement was extreme at the wholly disproportionate dismay and terror with which his overtures

were received. The young girl looked up with a startled, frightened glance, rose hurriedly, caught the iron hasps of the shutters of her window, and drew the shutters themselves close, until only a little thread of light glimmered between their wooden bars.

“‘She doth protest too much,’” said Castiglione to himself, with the ironical scepticism of a man much sought and spoiled by women. ‘She cannot have been sitting there all this time without having seen me looking at her long before I spoke; and a work-girl is not scared out of her wits by a few civil words from a neighbour.’

Nevertheless, the rapid and rude action served to excite his curiosity and stimulate his interest. He remained there till midnight, smoking, and throwing away the ends of many cigarettes; but he saw nothing more to reward him than the narrow gleams of light between the unpainted bars of the window-shutters.

‘She is only so coy to draw me on,’ he told himself; and yet calculation and intrigue did not seem to him to suit that pale, Cenci-like profile which had been illumined by the rays of the little oil-lamp.

‘Pshaw! all women are alike, Ruffi!’ he said, with disappointment, as, tired of watching and waiting, he threw his last cigarette down amongst the rosebuds and went indoors.

‘Wuff!’ said Ruffino, in an irritated adieu to the striped cat. If the duplicity of women annoyed and wearied his master, the perversity and insolence of cats was the one cross laid on his own life.

### III

AFTER dinner on the following evening Castiglione strolled through the rooms, and returned to the loggia; he sat down on the marble chair, and took a copy of Lucian with him; Lucian was his favourite author. A servant set a reading-lamp down on the round marble table near, and he was left to his book, his cigarette, the nightingales and the owls, for his evening’s society.

Every now and then he glanced at the little corner house visible through the foliage. The shutters remained closed. If there were no other outlet for air at the other side of the house, he knew that the residents must be stifled and miserable, thus shut up, in a warm night in late May; and he felt repentant for his own harmless words.

He sat thus an hour or more, looking now and then at his Lucian, which he knew almost by heart, and thinking of the days of his earliest youth, when his mother’s graceful form had passed so often up



and down the loggia in the moonlight on just such summer nights as this.

She was buried in the palace chapel, a marvel of architecture and of painting, erected and ornamented by Bramante. But it had never seemed to him as if she could really be imprisoned there, under those marble saints and angels, and beneath the jewelled altars and the high dome, which gleamed with colour like some great jewel itself.

She seemed more near him here, where the midsummer moon was sailing beyond the arched colonnades, and the birds which she had loved so well were calling from the dusk.

She had filled his childish mind with high ideals, and now, remembering the lofty destinies which she had imagined for him, his life seemed to him purposeless and useless; as it was, it would not have contented her, although, indeed, it was more blameless in much than are most lives of men of his rank and generation.

It grew late.

Ruffino, tired of speculating on the possible consequences of a jump into the lane, had turned on his side and gone to sleep: even Homer nods and Jupiter dozes now and then. Suddenly, however, he awoke with a sharp little bark. He had heard in his

slumber the sound of an opening window. Castiglione heard it also, and looked cautiously through the screen of foliage.

The girl was opening the shutter, and securing it by its iron hasp to the wall. Then she seated herself by it, and by the feeble light of an oil-wick began to sew linen. Castiglione could plainly see her profile like a delicate cameo against the darkness within.

‘Did she never sleep? Was she for ever working?’ he wondered. He took extreme care not to be seen, lest he should again cause her to take flight: but he looked no more at his Lucian; he even extinguished his reading-lamp, lest the rays of it, seen through the leaves, should catch her eyes, and affright her anew. Her features were quite visible to him, surrounded as they were by deep shadow; and the light of her flickering oil-wick fell full upon her fair, almost transparent, and quickly-moving hands. Now and then she glanced towards the loggia, and listened when some richer burst of song from the nightingales beguiled her to pause for a moment. But almost continually she went on with her sewing, stopping only to thread her needle; yet he could have sworn that her ears lost no single note of all those passionate lays with which his gardens were



resounding from every laurel-grove, and alley of arbutus, and thicket of rose and myrtle.

He felt desperately tempted to address her again, but he resisted the temptation; it seemed to him too cruel, too selfish to run the risk of again forcing her to deprive herself of the air, which was now fresh with the freshness of night and filled with the scent of orange-blossoms. If his gardens could afford her any compensation for the wretched life she led, he was glad that they should do so. And yet an overwhelming desire to speak again to her possessed him. Below, the lane became quite silent, except for an occasional shout or oath from some passer-by, or the cry of a fractious child from one of the interiors; the inhabitants were very poor, and of the lowest class, but they were all labouring folk, and slept early and soundly on their beds of sacking. There was something of mystery, of communion, almost of intimacy, in the sense that he and she were so near each other, and yet so ignorant of each other; in the stillness of the night, both awake, while all the city seemed to sleep.

As she sat at the window, he could see every movement of her hands; he could almost see her breath come and go. Her long locks shaded her cheek as she looked down on her work, and the

cheek was pale and thin, although it had the soft, round curves of youth.

Twice or thrice she paused, and pushed her hair off her temples with a gesture of extreme fatigue ; but she soon resumed her work again, and sewed on, and on, and on, whilst the nightingales shouted from the laurels and the myrtles of the garden.

It was three in the morning when she at last ceased, overcome with an exhaustion which she could no longer combat. She put out the light and closed the shutter.

Castiglione rose and shook himself, like one who shakes off a spell. He had been four hours watching her needle fly in and out, and the light of the lamp shine on her hair ; he felt embarrassed and ashamed, although there was no spectator of his romantic vigil. He went indoors to go to his bed, where Ruffino curled himself up and dreamed of cats.

‘Am I moonstruck?’ thought Castiglione, as he lay gazing at the pale colossal figures of the tapestry of his chamber, unable to fall asleep. ‘It is absurd ! It is monstrous ! A little sempstress, and I dare not address her ! I will go to that end of the loggia no more. It comes of *ennui*. I have nothing to think of here, and so my head gets filled with folly.

In the morning he said to Viviani, the house-steward, who was waiting on him for orders: 'Tell me, did they all fall through, the negotiations which my father made with those Jews, Baldacchi, Cortona, Leveschi, and the others, for the purchase of the lane which adjoins the garden?'

'Yes, my lord duke,' replied the steward, 'the price asked by Baldacchi and the others was preposterous. There was no means of bringing them to reason. All was in vain.'

'The lane is an intolerable nuisance. What was the price asked?'

Viviani named it.

'It was indeed enormous,' said Castiglione. 'But open the matter again with him. The lane is unhealthy and odious, and the noises from it make it impossible to be at peace either in the loggia or in these rooms opening on it.'

'That is undoubtedly the fact, your excellency,' replied Viviani; 'but if I may be permitted to make a remark, I would suggest that your lordship's most revered and sainted fathers have been trying to purchase it for three centuries, and have never considered it worth the vast expenditure required.'

'I will buy it at any price,' said Castiglione, very imprudently.

‘My lord is master of his purse and of his judgment,’ said the steward, with humility; ‘the first we know is inexhaustible, the latter we know is unimpeachable.’

‘You are a courtier, my good Viviani.’

‘Oh no, your excellency, I am only the devoted though feeble servant of yourself and of your illustrious house.’

‘Nevertheless,’ thought Castiglione, ‘if you are unwilling that I should buy the lane from its owners, it is only that they will not give you a percentage high enough for your own taste and pocket.’

Aloud he added: ‘But the corner house—the house which touches on the Sepolte Vive—the Jews do not own that, I think?’

‘No, my lord,’ answered the steward, wondering whither these questions tended. ‘It belongs to Sior’ Veneranda, the Pilotti widow; she inherited it. She would ask its weight in gold, for she sets great store on it; and she is a grinding skinflint, is Sior’ Veneranda.’

‘Well, find out her price,’ said Castiglione, carelessly. ‘The whole place is a horrible eyesore, and, somehow or other, sooner or later, it must belong to us.’

Was this girl all alone in her part of this little



corner house, he wondered continually, with its lichen-grown stones without and its Dutch-like interior? It seemed impossible; yet he saw no one else, except the old woman who owned it, and who lived below, and sold charcoal and cabbages, rotten firewood, and perishing fruit.

He watched her by day and by evening, and her habits had the regularity of the Angelus and the Ave Maria. As soon as the sun smote hot and blinding on the walls, she shut the old, rickety wooden shutters attached to the casements; at early evening she was again at work with them wide opened. Now and then she looked out at the loggia and its flowers, then again resumed her labours of one kind or another. He saw that she cooked for herself at a little charcoal-stove in the corner of the room, and she drew up her bread with a cord from the seller who stood below. She did the same by various vegetables, which seemed to him, with the bread, to constitute her only food. It was when she leaned out to draw up this cord that he saw her most clearly; saw her slender but beautifully-shaped arms and wrists, her youthful bust, her shining hair, the vigour and grace which she put into this homely and simple act. He never heard her speak to any one, except a brief word of thanks to the itinerant vendor

who brought her loaf and her cabbage, or carrots, or artichokes, underneath her lattice.

‘What an existence!’ thought Castiglione with horror, and a sense of shame that he, a man, had all his life enjoyed luxury and abundance, and been waited on and pampered and amused by every one who approached him.

It interested him, this little homely idyll, shut up in those two quaint little rooms, which he could almost have touched with his hand if he had leaned out over his balustrade. At any other time he would have been too much occupied and amused by other things to have paid any attention to it; but in these long, empty days and evenings, it beguiled his notice. He did not go outside the walls of the palace, for at any moment his father’s state might pass from stupor into death; and he was dejected, and oppressed with the sense of that impending dissolution, and of all the burdens which would devolve on himself by his succession to the great fief of Montefeltro. He would have infinitely preferred to remain what he was; he had everything he wanted, and no responsibilities; his father once dead, a vast and troublesome mass of honours and of duties would fall like a storm of hail upon himself. The Prince of Montefeltro could not lead the careless, irresponsible, *boulevardier* life which



had been so agreeable to the Duke of Castiglione. His future would be trammelled, burdened, and tedious; and, like every man of pleasure, tedium was worse to him than misfortune.

Therefore, in these unoccupied and idle moments, when a sense of decorum and respect withheld him from all those pastimes which were natural to his age and tastes, he frequented the loggia, and took more and more interest in the very simple interior, which he could see through the screen of leaves.

In the wall of the second little chamber there was a door, and it led, he could perceive, into a third room, or closet, beyond; but into this last retreat his sight could not pierce.

Its darkness and its mystery excited and tormented him. The girl passed much of her time there. Perhaps, nay, most probably, she had a lover, he reflected. He saw none, but he felt sure that some man there must be. When the wooden shutters were shut there were, certainly, some compensations behind them for that life of incessant toil and privation.

One day he questioned one of the gardeners whom he found at work beside the marble of the fishpond:

‘Who lives in that little house which ends the lane?’

The man reflected, straightening his back after stooping over the ground-ivy.

‘I think it is some foreigner, your excellency ; a pagan, I believe.’

‘Why a pagan?’

‘Not a Christian, your excellency. They never go to mass.’

‘Who are they?’

‘There is a sick man there, most illustrious, as well as the girl.’

‘What is the man to the maiden?’

The gardener shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands.

‘I would not presume to say, your excellency. With pagans, who can tell?’

Castiglione walked on under his trees, irritated at the man’s foolish prejudices, and more irritated at what he heard.

Into the innermost room it was impossible to see, and his mind instantly ran to the natural conclusion.

Ruffino looked out of one eye askance at him, recognising that he was not pleased ; and Ruffino himself yawned.

The garden was a very nice place, but it lacked interest to a dog-of-the-world ; besides, his master,

slow and pensive, pacing to and fro the cool, dark alleys between the walls of clipt cypress and bay, affected his nerves by sympathy—that sympathy with human moods and fancies which dogs are so quick to render, but which their owners so rarely render to them.

When his master was as melancholy as this, Ruffino could not find it in his heart to be gay; instead of investigating suspicious crannies in the rockeries and walls, and dashing after lizards over flower-beds, or springing high in air to catch butterflies, as he was often wont to do, he walked demurely behind, or in front, with his tail at half-mast, and in his air an expression, chastened and subdued, which he deemed adapted to his friend's feelings. The lizards shot across his path, and the tiny garden-mice frisked under his very nose: he was not to be beguiled into sport of any kind. Now and then he cocked one ear anxiously when he heard a dog bark beyond the garden-walls; that was his sole concession to the outer world.

But it was dull work, and afforded no scope to the energy and gaiety of his character; therefore, when his master ascended to the loggia, he led the way every evening with alacrity to that side of it which looked upon the lane, carrying his tail high on one side of

his back, as his habit was when pleased ; and whilst Castiglione sat on the marble chair, and lit his cigarettes one after another, Ruffino watched through the leaves this undisciplined rabble below, human, canine, and feline, who stood much in need of his admonition and administration.

## IV

CASTIGLIONE almost every night went in to his dinner alone, and dined in solitary state, surrounded by Florentine tapestry and Roman statues, and above his head a ceiling of Guercino's, painted with that favourite subject of all Italian artists, Aurora escaping from Tithonus. Ruffino was always seated on a chair beside him, and knew what truffles meant, and what an ortolan tasted like, as well as any epicure in a Paris or London clubhouse.

Of his many friends and relatives, almost all had already left Rome for the hot season ; and of the few who remained, there were none whom he cared to invite to break his solitude.

The Italian manner of greeting the Pale Rider on the White Horse is to gather a voluble crowd in the house and around the sickbed ; then, when it is quite certain that death is nigh, everyone rushes out of the

house, and far away, to avoid meeting with it, and the dying person is left to struggle through his last fight for breath, his last wrestling with the spectre, as best he can, alone. Sometimes, perhaps, a nun will stay beside him, or a priest, but rarely even these; relatives never, not the nearest. Death is a painful spectacle, and to witness it brings ill-luck. Wherefore, then, remain?

Castiglione, however, having northern blood in him, and different ways, shut the palace to all except his uncles and his cousins, and the priests of the Church, and remained alone; and intended so to remain until all should be over.

'*Don Eczzelino manca un Venerdì,*' said Magliabecchi, with a groan, to the chaplain. To miss a Friday is a popular periphrase to express politely a belief that a man is a lunatic; and nothing could seem more insane to these Romans than for a person like the Duke of Castiglione to shut himself up thus in solitude, instead of filling the house with a throng of noble and clerical mourners, who would have wept and sighed, and dined and supped, and torn their hair, and drained big beakers of the old, priceless wines of the Montefeltro cellars. But all these ways were odious to one who had lived so much away from them, and it was in vain that they were



urged upon him ; he would not hear of them for a moment.

‘ If only he lay in the place of the sainted Prince,’ sighed the doctor and the chaplain ; ‘ he and his accursed little dog ! ’

Ruffino represented the Evil One in person to both these worthies ; he had a way of rolling his black eyes at them, and of making certain movements of his lips, emitting at the same time a subdued, menacing growl, which signified how good their calves would taste, if only he could try his teeth on them, which seemed to these gentlemen nothing short of diabolic. They both thought, longingly, of various poisons reposing in the doctor’s cases which could have made Ruffino innocuous and immovable for evermore in the space of a second ; but fear withheld them from resorting to these measures of self-defence ; the crime would be easily done, but they dreaded his owner’s discovery of the act, and the vengeance he would take for it.

They had a mutual and intense dislike to their future master : he was, in their opinion, impious and foreign in his ways. They knew that he only bore with them to obey his father, and that as soon as their patron should be laid to his last rest in the chapel crypt, they would be politely but imperatively



bidden to betake themselves and their plunder elsewhere. They had lived there nearly all their lives, like rats in a cheese-house, and the death of Montefeltro would be their knell of exile from all the luxurious living, and successful plottings and pickings, which they had enjoyed in these long and prosperous years of fraud and fatness. To do the Duke of Castiglione any bad turn would have been delightful to them.

This hatred for the heir came from the conviction, felt by both the physician and the chaplain, that he would never be tricked or beguiled into the same position as his father had accepted. His father, to all the world an arrogant tyrant, had been, in actual fact, a mere victim of the designing and unscrupulous men who had surrounded him. There was no hope for them of obtaining such an influence over his son, who thought for himself, saw for himself, judged for himself, and, despite the carelessness and good nature of his temper, had a talent only second to Ruffino's for discovering and unmasking a hypocrite.

These lonely days meanwhile made a deep and painful impression on him. He had led a gay and selfish life, like other men of his age and rank, although his heart had remained more tender than

is usual in a life of mere pleasure. He had seldom paused to think of the problems and the mysteries of existence, and of its misery and necessity he had only known from hearsay.

His reflections, as he sat alone in the lustrous moonlight, with that crowded and poverty-stricken lane so close to him, were troubled and perplexed. He felt that he could never again return to the same idle, thoughtless, agreeable habits which had hitherto absorbed and contented him: he would henceforth be Montefeltro, lord of vast tracts of land in the pestilence-haunted Campagna, in the terrible, famine-stricken Basilicata, in the morasses and marshes of the Maremma, in the scorched and starved plains of the Puglia.

The country herself was like a lamb torn by the jaws of two quarrelling wolves: the one the Church, avaricious, cruel, and blind; the other the Government, insatiate, despotic, and torturing. The one was as bad as the other, and each alike was the foe, the oppressor, and the thief of the nation on which it was fastened. Neither Church nor Government would help him in his task, for he abhorred them both, and saw that both alike were leeches which drained the blood of the people. His irresponsible life of liberty and ease was at an end: with the

death of Montefeltro would devolve on him duties, possessions, obligations which he could not in honour evade; and he would be forced to decide on many questions which hitherto he had been able to leave in abeyance, inclining neither to one side nor the other. He shrank from the ordeal. He loved ease, serenity, art, pleasure; the prospect of being driven into the choice of Hercules was painful and oppressive to his temperament.

His father's state gave him sufficient excuse to follow his momentary inclination to be alone: the sense of approaching death was in the atmosphere; the household moved about noiselessly; the great doors were opened and shut without sound; the whole vast palace seemed quiet as the grave; even Ruffino felt the influence of his surroundings, and when indoors subdued his utterances to a smothered growl, or a bark *a mezza voce*.

Of his neighbour at the little corner house, Castiglione, thus left to himself, and to the impressions of the moment, thought more than was wise or than was welcome to him; the mystery which appeared to surround her stimulated his interest to a dangerous extent.

Sometimes he bowed to her silently, in sign of his respect for her solitude, and obedience to her

wishes, but he did not attempt to force his presence or his conversation upon her. Himself unseen, he watched her many an hour, studying the lines of her form, the purity of her profile, the pathetic, colourless beauty of her face. It was that kind of beauty which gains by becoming familiar; he drew her portrait a hundred times, and never contented himself, though he was an artist of no mean capacity. But there was something ethereal and fugitive in her which it was difficult to render; something of the light of the soul, of that higher beauty which comes from high thoughts and heroic sacrifice, for which all mediums of art seemed too gross.

He could easily have heard any thing and every thing which there might have been to hear if he had inquired of his household; but he was withheld from doing so by a vague sentiment that it would ill become his dignity to show this curiosity, above all at such a moment. He could not bring himself to let his subordinates know that, when his father lay dying, he was interested in watching the coming and going of one of the inhabitants of the Viccolo of S. Anastasia. He was careless, negligent of appearances, and even what his father called democratic, in some things; but all the instincts of his race and habits of his breeding imbued him with a strong



pride of birth and a strong sense of dignity. There was little that would be flattering to either in the confession that he passed this period of what should be, at least in semblance, mourning, in amusing himself with the light and shade of a lamp falling on the features of a work-girl.

A work-girl she must be, he thought, in class and occupation, although her beauty was of a patrician and poetic type.

Whenever he saw her, she was colouring little prints which lay upon the deal table, or sewing linen, or doing some household work. She interested him powerfully; but he could not bring himself to confess such an interest, even so far as it would be revealed if he in any way questioned his people. He felt that he could never sit again at that side of the loggia if they knew, or guessed, why the screen of leaves was so attractive to him. It was not a moment at which a man who had any self-respect would like his servants to suppose him capable of being diverted by a common *amourette*. It was only when he was sure that he was unobserved that he returned to the marble seat under the tea-roses and jessamine which commanded that side view into the narrow, teeming, noisy lane. All the household, from Magliabecchi down to the



very scullions, knew that he had for years and years desired the purchase and destruction of this eyesore ; he would become absurd, in their estimate, if they once saw his gaze riveted on that little mean house at the end of the passage. Ruffino alone knew how often he went there, and Ruffino approved : the lane was to him a world of interest, movement, and fascination, which drew him to it all the more magnetically because he was unable to see very far into it, and was conscious that it was all going to rack and ruin for want of his inspection and direction.

At times Castiglione, in the still, balmy night, walked down the marble stairs into the delicious gardens, and wandered under the laurel hedges where the nightingales nested, and past the huge, leafy fish-ponds where carp, centuries old, floated lazily under water-lilies, and down the great, dark avenues of ilex, whose impenetrable foliage closed over his head. And Ruffino went with him conscientiously, step by step, and when his master paused, indulged himself in a roll in the dewy grass ; but the vast, silent, odorous gardens did not interest him so much as did that abominable lane, where vulgar dogs scratched in heaps of refuse, and infamous cats mewed and miauled, and where dark,

foul, scarce-seen doorways suggested endless mysteries to be explored. The gardens were so beautifully kept, so old, so solitary, so tranquil, that there was little in them, except an occasional gardener's boy, requiring to be called to order; and Ruffino felt that there was no scope in this sylvan paradise for his imperial genius of domination and dictation. Whereas, could he only get down into the lane, he knew that these dogs would soon be rolled on their own cinder-heaps, and that those cats would soon wish that they had never been kittenened. Ruffino had a great mind in a little body, and, like most great minds, was pugnacious from a consciousness, far nobler than mere vanity, that he had been born to set the chaos of the world aright; only, unlike Hamlet, he deemed the mission flattering and agreeable, and was not troubled by any doubts as to his own capabilities for its government.

But how to get down to the lane? Even the high and undaunted spirit of Ruffino was forced to admit that ten feet was too much of a jump; and though he knew the regular way down to it from the courtyard of the palace, there was no chance of getting out of that courtyard, for the porter would not open the gates to him without his master, and in these days and nights his master did not once

pass through those gates; the only exercise he took was in the gardens, which stretched as far as the walls of the Vatican Gardens, and were more than a mile in length.

It was an uneventful, and, to all except Ruffino, a painful and tedious period. Montefeltro continued to exist in the same comatose state; it could scarcely be called life, and yet it was not death. Innumerable names were written down in the book at the porter's lodge; countless letters and cards were left in inquiry and in condolence; all the great Black nobility of Rome, and some of the White, flocked there: but the bronze gates remained inexorably shut to all.

'The Prince is beyond hope, and the Duke sees no one,' was the reply which the janitor of those august portals, stately in scarlet and gold, with a cocked hat and halberd, returned to every inquiry and entreaty.

Castiglione had never been either shy or slow in affairs with women: he was used to easy and rapid courtships of them, his person and position alike causing him to be received with universal favour. But now he seemed possessed with the hesitation and the modesty of a schoolboy before a first love. He laughed at himself. 'Good heavens!' he thought,

with impatience and derision; 'does this really interest me? Am I actually in love with a shadow, a nameless personality, an unknown, of whom I see nothing but the profile and the hands?'

It was so absurd that, alone as he was, he laughed aloud one evening; and Ruffino, hearing, recovered his spirits, hoisted his own tail in the air, and caught a lizard's.

The absurdity of it, however, did not prevent him from going out on to the loggia after dinner. On these absurdities, incongruous and anomalous though they be, a whimsical and amorous fancy best thrives: the unwisdom of a passion is its nourishing dew, the apparent impossibility of it makes its actual strength; love is a flower which grows luxuriantly on a barren rock, and only dies of a too favourable soil.

When he approached the balustrade, it was at that beautiful moment when day merges into night, when the rosy and golden flush remaining after the sunset is met by the deep twilight blue of the hushed evening. The moon was rising above the ilex woods of his own gardens, and hung, broad and yellow, and magnified by the atmosphere, amidst grey and silvered clouds. The intense odours of the gardens below filled the air with perfume, and from the



street beyond them came the sound of a lute and of a young tenor voice singing joyously. For the moment there was no other sound; the harsh outcries of the lanes were stilled, the peace of a summer night descended on the city.

The casements of the little corner house were open, and at one of them the girl was standing; the reflections from the warmth of the west fell on her face and throat, and lighted up her large, light brown eyes; there was a rapt, beatified expression on her countenance, a faint smile parted her lips. She was gazing up into the foliage of the loggia, and evidently was listening.

‘Is the lutist serenading her?’ thought Castiglione, with unreasonable anger. But the sound of the lute and of the tenor voice grew fainter and fainter, and finally ceased as the player, no doubt, went higher up the street; and the girl continued to listen, and to look, with the smile of St. Cecilia on her face.

Then at last he divined what she saw, and to what she listened: it was a nightingale singing in the rose-boughs to his mate upon her nest.

That surpassing melody was so eloquent, day and night, all through the Montefeltro gardens, from April to July, that he had never guessed before that



it was this attraction which drew her so often to her window.

Where he stood a marble corbel, with a sculptured Faun and goat, entirely screened him from her sight, and he could gaze at her uninterruptedly. She was poor, she was meanly clad ; there was no doubt that she dusted and swept and washed her little home, made her own bed, her own fire, her own food ; and yet poverty and toil had not been able to take from her the signs of race : the slender hands, the delicate nostrils, the pure, transparent skin, and the fine lines of brow and chin. Who could she be ? Whence could she have come ? What could have dragged her down into this lonely and miserable existence ?

But then it was not, perhaps, lonely, if what the gardener had said was true ?

There was a sick man in that inner chamber into whose dusky limits his eyes could not see. Doubtless it was for this companion of her adversity that she toiled and lived, and found a certain happiness, even in this narrow and sordid home.

The thought of this man who dwelt with her hardened his heart against his growing interest in her, and her poverty, which had so powerful a hold on him, and took from her that halo of virginal innocence which had seemed to make her too sacred

to be rudely approached. After all, a girl who lived in a little hole like this with a lover, ill or well, was not so holy or so hallowed that he himself need any longer hesitate to make such advances to her as he chose. If the lover, ill or well, disliked them, so much the worse for him.

Acting on that impulse, he walked up to the balustrade, pushed aside the rose and jessamine boughs, and let himself become visible to her.

‘You are listening to my nightingales, signorina?’ he said, softly. ‘If you would come into the gardens to hear them better, you would make me very happy. I ventured to tell you so the other night, and I was vexed to see that I seemed only to offend you.’

As soon as he had spoken the words, he regretted them, for they destroyed in a single instant the unconscious and unstudied beauty of her attitude, and the pleasure she had taken in the birds. She changed colour violently, and stared at him with her hazel, Cenci-like eyes; he could almost see the fluttering of her heart and hear the quickness of her breath.

‘I beg your pardon,’ she said, hurriedly; ‘I did not know that you were—that any one was—there. You did not offend me. I thank you very much, but I cannot listen to anything you say.’

Then breathlessly, and with the agitation of some discovered criminal, she withdrew from the window, and shut the wooden shutters again with precipitation and alarm.

‘What have I done?’ thought Castiglione, regretfully. ‘Now she is deprived of light and air once more; cooped up, on a June evening, behind a wooden blind! Is it assumed or genuine, all that shyness and terror? After all, she cannot live in that lane, and remain the *Casta diva* of romance; and she must know as well as I know, that this is not an unoccupied and enchanted palace. By the heavens above us, if that were acting, it was admirable acting, incomparable acting! Perhaps the sick Lothario is a jealous brute.’

He gathered a cluster of the roses, and threw them across towards the other casement, which remained open. But they fell short of it, and dropped in the dust and filth of the stones below. In another moment the shutter of that window was closed also by that thin, small hand which had such a charm for him; the little house was like a blind or eyeless face in front of him.

‘What folly! Does she think me a monster?’ said Castiglione angrily, half aloud. He regretted his advances, since they had deprived her of light and

air ; he hated to think of her driven into that stifling, dusky little interior, whilst the birds sang, and the moon rose, and the great white cups of the magnolias poured out their perfume like wine. There was no doubt left in his mind that she had acted out of fear of her lover's jealousy. Castiglione had a wide experience of her sex, and he did not believe in his own presence causing alarm or aversion in any woman. But he hated to think of her cooped up indoors, and deprived, through his fault, of any consolation for her wretched fate which she might have been able to gain from the enjoyment which his roses and his nightingales offered her.

He went down the marble stairs into the gardens, and picked up some smooth pebbles, and, returning with these to the loggia, threw first one, and then another, and then another, against the closed shutter, Ruffino watching the action with keen excitement and a puzzled countenance.

Boys threw stones, he knew, and dogs often felt them, to their sorrow ; but why his master should throw these he failed to imagine. There was not even a cat on the roof. Though to Ruffino this action appeared wholly aimless, yet the pebbles went, one after another, against the wood ; but they produced no response whatever. The little corner house was barred to the outer



world as completely as though it were a zenana in the East.

‘What folly!’ he repeated: such senseless terror and such prolonged obstinacy irritated him extremely. An invitation to walk in his garden was not an insult to scare either the shyest woman, or the most jealous guardian of her, out of their wits: and the goodness of his heart made him sorry that she should be deprived of the cool evening air through his own unconsidered and harmless overtures.

The last flush of lingering daylight faded; the moon rose higher in the heavens; the soft notes of the scops owl thrilled through the darkness. Castiglione, vexed, irritated, and perplexed, paced up and down the length of the loggia, repeating to himself fragments of Ariosto and Tasso which came back to his memory from boyish days: the binding of Angelica and Medoro in their love-knots, and the slaughter of Rinaldo by the nymphs with the white lilies. It seemed to him as if he himself had been bound in such magic bands, and slain by a white lily.

## V

RUFFINO, casting now and then a careful glance at his master to be sure that he came to no harm,



remained beside the balustrade, peering down into the lane, and ejaculating every now and then a wuff! wuff! of warning to the inhabitants below. In his own mind he was always turning over the question of whether a jump into it would, or would not, be prudent as regarded his own bones. He was forbidden ever to go out anywhere alone; but he did not attach much importance to the virtue of obedience: a dog so often knew what was best and wisest to do so very much better than a man could possibly know. A man has no nose to speak of; the human olfactory nerves are defective, blunted, contemptibly limited in what they perceive: to the finer nerves of the canine nose the human nasal organ is but a mere elementary pretence of a nose, and, to the mind of a dog, the possessor of such an imperfect guide must inevitably go astray.

Maida could find Scott across seas and strange lands by her nose alone; Scott could not so have found Maida.

So that Ruffino, though he knew well that he was forbidden to go into the lane, or anywhere indeed, except the gardens, by himself, would not have deemed it necessary to observe the injunction; it was only the difficulty of violating it which troubled him. He could jump with great sureness

and agility, but the lane was a long way down below the loggia, and he was in doubts whether to alight on those stones would be an agreeable sensation. Ruffino, like all dogs, was of the Epicurean philosophy : unless a cat or another dog forced him into such a state of excitement and emotion that he lost all control over himself, he was always careful not to incur unpleasant sensations or run any risks to life or limb. In defence of his master he would have faced lions and tigers, devils and men, unhesitatingly ; but then his master was never in any kind of danger, so that Ruffino was at liberty to consider his own safety and comfort as completely as he chose ; and he did consider them, with a Pepys-like interest in himself, and a Montaigne-like calmness of judgment, which only in rare occasions of excitation ever failed him.

Philosophically he now sat and weighed carefully the chances of the descent.

How deep was the drop into the lane ? How sharp were the uneven stones paving it ? Would the game be worth the candle if he got there ? Would the roses have thorns if he went past them ? Would he be any truly nearer the cats when he had taken the jump, or would they all retreat instantly into cellars at his mere approach ?

These questions absorbed him as he sat, with his ears cocked and his ruff raised very high, looking over the edge of the balustrade into the gutters beneath him.

Ruffino's imagination was lively, and his passionate instinct to alter, to interfere, and to command was equalled only by that of the present German Kaiser: he saw himself as he would be if he could only get down there, scattering the children, experimenting on the youths' ankles, sternly interrogating the dogs, exploring the dark interiors, and cheyving the breath out of every cat alive there. 'The harmless, necessary cat,' said the natural-history books. Harmless? —a creature who could spit like a soda-water bottle, and scratch like a human virago! And necessary? —what strange tastes must those have had who could ever have found her so! Why, a cat was such a low creature that she even *ate* the rodents which she killed! In Ruffino's estimation there was no lower depth of ignominy.

The dwellers in the lane had lighted their little flaring, foul-smelling, petroleum-fed wicks, and these sparks of light blazed now here, and now there, in darksome doorways, and in open holes which did service as windows, thus making coarse and clumsy imitations of the flitting and flashing of the fairy-

like fireflies with which the gardens were at that hour animated and illumined.

Cautiously and softly the closed shutters of the corner cottage opened, and the dimly-lit interior, which so interested him, was once more visible; he did not move or speak, but through the foliage watched anxiously.

His young neighbour was again at work; sewing-work, over which her head was bent assiduously. It looked to him like some coarse shirting at which she stitched so unceasingly, the oil-wick burning feebly beside her, her profile outlined against the shadows like a white cameo cut on a dark ground. He held his breath and sat, immovable, watching her through the network of the rose-foliage.

An hour passed on, and the maiden had never lifted up her head from her sewing. Suddenly, above the other noises of the passage-way below, he heard a harsh, coarse voice, raised in fury, and saw the old Veneranda Pilotti standing in the young girl's chamber, yelling at the top of her voice, and shaking her fists in the air, her white, shaggy hair streaming, and her lean form quivering with rage.

'Pay the rent, or out you will pack! Pay the rent, or I will sell you up!' she screamed, with a foul oath. 'Pay the rent, or out you will pack, you,



and your sick man, too ! Let him take up his bed and walk. A Jew was bid to do it once, and a heathen can do it now.'

'I will pay you as soon as I can. Pray have patience. Until now we have always paid you,' replied the girl, without shrinking, and with simple dignity ; but in the tension of her clasped hands, and in the deadly pallor of her face, he could see the violence of the emotion which she controlled.

The old woman shook both her fists in the air, and thrust her face across the table, until it almost touched that of her tenant, or lodger : the girl shrank back, with instinctive aversion, from the contact.

'Oh, you are proud, you minx ; you are too dainty to be touched by me !' yelled the old woman, made more furious by that involuntary action. 'I am an honest woman, I pay my way, I owe nobody anything ; and you, you worm, you beggar, you pagan, you think yourself too fine to be breathed upon by me ! I'll teach you what you are, and what I am ! I'll have the law on you ! The sheriff's officer and the carabineers shall bundle you out neck and crop, you, and your sick man, and we will sell your clothes off your back, as you've got nothing else. We'll sell the shoes off your feet, and the shift off your body, and the shirt off his, or his shroud, if he die



to-night ! You shall see, you shall see ; we will pack your sick man off to hospital, and you can go on the streets—why not ? You have got a fortune in your face, and yet you are not ashamed to shut yourself up here, and defraud an honest woman, when you could get——’

‘ Silence ! ’ said the girl, coldly. ‘ You can sell what I have, if you please ; it is your right, I know. But you have no right to insult and to outrage any one.’

The woman laughed brutally.

‘ Oho ! you can use fine words, can you, and play at being a fine lady ? You beggar’s brat from over seas, how dare you give yourself airs ! You heathen, as penniless as a rag doll ! Pay me, and then you can act the lady if you like, and starve on your fine words, for aught that I shall care. Pay me, I say ! Pay me ! pay me ! pay me ! ’

‘ I am sorry, but I cannot.’

She spoke still very quietly, even coldly ; to the looker-on at this pitiful scene it seemed as if he saw a delicate doe of the forest being torn and badgered by a butcher’s bitch.

His impulse was to call aloud to the old harri-  
dan that the rent should be paid by himself in the morning ; his even stronger impulse was to descend

into the lane below, and mount the stairs of the little house, and choke the beldame into silence with a handful of bank notes.

But the remembrance of the sick man restrained him, chilled him, made him doubt whether this scene, like the terror at sight of himself a few hours before, was not only an admirable piece of acting.

A man may be moved by the purest chivalry, but his enthusiasm will pale and halt before the thought that it will only serve another lover who has forestalled him in the life of the woman who interests him.

And this sick man—where was he? How came it that he did not find strength to say or to do something in defence of her? How could he lie like a log in that inner room, not even lifting his voice in her vindication?

If not so ill that he was at the point of death, surely such insults to a person beloved must give momentary strength, even to a fainting heart and palsied limbs?

The whole place was so small that it was impossible for any one living in it not to hear, in an inner chamber, all that passed in an outer one. Was he sleeping a sleep of stone, like the Emperor Barbarossa beneath the mountains of the Untersberg?

The old virago, swearing all the furious and filthy oaths of the Roman vernacular, spit across the table in sign of uttermost scorn and loathing, and, vowing by all that was holy to have the law on her tenant on the morrow, left the room with violent gestures, her lips seeming to emit flame and foulness as she went.

When the rickety, small door had closed on her, the girl sank down on her seat, and losing all her calmness and self-command, dropped her face upon her hands and sobbed bitterly.

Castiglione, unable to control himself any longer, rose, crossed the loggia, and descended the marble staircase into the gardens, then went to a little postern-door which opened out on the lane. This door was never used, and its massive bolts were rusty and almost immovable.

But after some minutes' laborious effort, he contrived to drag them out from their sockets, and to make the little door turn sullenly upon its hinges, Ruffino all the while watching his endeavours with an eagerness and wonder which filled his whole frame, from the tip of his nose to the tip of his tail, with intense and tremulous excitement.

Was he going to get into the lane at last? But, alas for his hopes! Castiglione, as he opened the

door, put his little friend back into the garden. 'Wait there, Ruffo,' he said, in a tone against which Ruffino, by sad experience, knew that there was no appeal. His master shut the door on him inexorably, and he was left with nothing to do but to scratch madly at the wood and fill the air with lamentation.

Castiglione crossed rapidly the angle between his own wall and that of the convent of the Sepolte Vive, and went to the little house. He had never been in the lane before. He knocked at its low, rounded, ancient door, which some one within was just barring up for the night.

'Who is there?' asked a voice, which he recognised as that of the old woman who had stormed and raved upstairs.

'I am the Duke of Castiglione—open!' he answered, in a low tone; he did not want to be seen or heard when on this errand, and he was afraid that Ruffino's piercing howls would attract the attention of some of his household, who would discover that the postern-door had been opened, and would, perhaps, bar it afresh, and thus cut off his retreat.

The door of the little house unclosed, and a flare of petroleum light, and the odour of garlic and herbs

and decaying vegetables, came into his face. The old woman herself stared at him, silenced, aghast, and paralysed with awe. Never before had one of the House of Montefeltro been seen in that lane within the memory of man.

He entered the house, making a gesture of silence, and drew the door close behind him.

‘I heard you speaking to your tenant or lodger upstairs,’ he said, sternly. ‘You are a disgrace to humanity. If you were not a woman, and old, I would give you over to the police. Here are three Napoleons, double the amount of your demand. Say nothing, but do not trouble the—the—persons upstairs, and merely tell them that you will allow them time. Remember, that I shall know exactly what you do or say; and if you speak of this matter, you will get no more money from me. Be wise and prudent, and learn to use decent language, as becomes your sex.’

Then he left her as abruptly as he had addressed her, and re-entered his gardens by the postern-door, Ruffino receiving him with frantic capers, and leaps, and circles of delight, as though he had returned from a journey as long and perilous as Marco Polo’s.

It had been very unkind in his master to leave



him behind; but the generous little soul of Ruffino, with a dog's magnanimity, forgave and forgot that in his ecstasy at his beloved one's safe return.

Castiglione went up the marble staircase lost in reverie. He knew that the charm of his gold and his name would protect his neighbour from all further persecution, and that the old woman's self-interest would safely purchase her silence.

Ruffino followed, meekly and sadly; when the first effervescence of delight had passed off, a sense of pained offence, of wounded dignity, replaced it: he had been pushed back and shut up in the garden; there was evidently something down in the lane which it was not thought proper he should see. And why? He was a travelled dog, a dog of the world; a dog who knew men and manners, who was 'versatile' in the true sense of the word. Why should he be treated as if he were a baby or a puppy? And if there had been any danger down there, how could his master ever possibly have gone into it without his (Ruffino's) companionship and protection?

It was a mystery and an affront. Ruffino expressed his sense of the injustice of it by the slant of his tail, and by that stiffness of gait which, in dogs as in men, expresses and symbolises wounded sentiments.

The attitude was, alas ! lost upon his master, who was thinking of the act he had done, dissatisfied because it was so little, and yet restlessly doubting whether the interest he felt in the sorrows and troubles of his neighbour was not a mere wasted folly. If she lived with a lover who had dragged her into such misery, was it for another man to take her out of it ? He knew absolutely nothing of her, and a high-bred sense of delicacy had made it impossible for him to gratify his curiosity by making any inquiries of the wretched old woman below. His pride had restrained him, and a nobler feeling also : it seemed to him mean and ill-mannered to play the spy on persons whom he befriended ; cowardly and unworthy to turn an act of charity into the means of discovering their secrets.

Whatever or whoever they were, they needed pity, and were poor.

‘Ah, Ruffino, what a misfortune it is to be a sentimentalist ! To think that all the pretty *coquines* who have flattered, and tricked, and robbed me, have not taken all this kind of nonsense out of me ! I daresay this child with the Cenci eyes, and the white-rose cheeks, is no better than they were, though she is reared in a harder school. Who is the man, Ruffino ? Who is the white-livered cur

who spends his days in bed, and does not even raise his voice in her defence ?'

Ruffino could not interest himself in the question. He had been considered unworthy to investigate the mysteries of the lane, and if his master felt worried by what he had seen there, it was an accident for which Ruffino was clearly not responsible. He occupied himself, with much ostentation of indifference, in going round after his own tail to capture a flea lodged in it.

Fleas, he considered, were subjects of much more serious difficulty than human fancies and fiddle-faddles.

Castiglione, glancing through the leaves, saw that the girl had resumed her sewing: her face looked ashen pale in the light of her lamp; she was working as if every breath of life depended on each stitch.

'She must love the man,' he thought, 'for certainly no more miserable fate than this could ever be offered to her.'

He was ashamed to think that even the old woman who owned the corner house might divine his weakness from his intervention between her and her victim, or that his servants bringing his coffee or his letters out on to the loggia might suspect

the reason which made him take his seat on that side of it where the noises from the lane were audible.

Conscience makes cowards of the bravest; and he was conscious that the attraction to which he surrendered himself was not wise, or flattering to his dignity. But it was stronger than himself, and, whatever suspicions his intelligence and experience might bid him entertain, one glance at the pure, pale profile of his young neighbour, and at her slender, ever-busy hands, sufficed to scatter them to the winds.

But his warm and tender sympathies were checked by the misgivings as to the reality of that which excited them. He had been the object of too many solicitations and schemes on the part of women not to have become sceptical with his mind, although his nature was impulsive and trustful. His experience told him that all which excited his interest might be a mere picture, artificially arranged to excite his curiosity and pity. With his heart he believed in her undoubtingly; but his acquired wariness and incredulity made him sensible that the romance and pathos of the situation might very possibly be only parts of an ingenious fiction.

Like all men of generous character, he had been

in his earlier years both robbed and duped. He knew that it was extremely probable that all which so affected and attracted him now, might be but the clever *mise en scène* of a melodrama carefully designed to draw him at once by his pity and his passions. Then, he had been absent from Rome three years, and, according to the witness of the neighbourhood, she had lived thus more than that space of time. Still, it was possible that, if she were the companion of a penniless, jealous lover, she might have seen in the arrival of the heir of Montefeltro an occasion for other and more advantageous intrigues. He hated to think so, for suspicion to fine natures always seems contemptible and base; but his good sense, and his sad knowledge of life, forced him to admit the possibility of it.

Every man resents the idea that he may be the dupe of his better emotions; and there were times when, if he had not been tied to the spot by his father's state, he would have gone out of the city to shake off the too patent seduction of this mystery, so near to him, yet so intangible and unchangeable.

Some half-hour after his ascent to the loggia that evening, the major-domo approached him with a message from the house-physician, to require



his presence for a moment indoors. A change had been observed in his father's state: he was breathing heavily, and his eyes had unclosed; recovery was almost impossible; it was thought that this faint movement, this feeble flicker of consciousness, must be the precursor of the final change of all.

Castiglione hastened across the house, and to the apartments occupied by the Prince, and, reaching his bedside, stooping, spoke a few gentle words. His father's eyes had a momentary glare of recognition, in which there was little kindness or affection; then their wrinkled, swollen lids drooped over them again, and he sank once more into the sort of trance—half-stupor, half-slumber—in which he had lain, and might yet lay, so many dreary days.

‘I will sit with him to-night,’ said his son; and did so, whilst Ruffino slept, or watched fitfully, hidden under the bed, and the deep bells of the many churches around tolled the hours in succession with slow, booming strokes.

## VI

RUFFINO, lying thus, motionless, and very much bored, under the dying magnate's couch, meditated long and sullenly on the slight which had been put upon him, and on the means by which he could possibly compass an unperceived descent into the lane. The chief difficulty which presented itself to his mind was the disloyalty involved in leaving his master. He had never left him, voluntarily, for an hour, and it was a desertion which would, he felt, be extremely repugnant to him, to allow his dear friend and owner to remain unprotected even for ten minutes. But then he had been insulted and ill-treated by that beloved friend; he had been thrust back into the garden and shut up in it. The blow to his self-appreciation had been severe, and the stimulus which it gave to his curiosity was immense and irresistible. On the whole, the outrage which had been done to him decided him, if he got the chance, to go down into this mysterious *terra incognita*, no matter what the cost. He had seen the dogs who dwelt there scratching and smelling so madly and indefatigably amongst the rubbish-heaps, that the always-keen imagination with which he was gifted (or cursed) was heated to boiling

over, and the conviction grew upon him more and more that something very extraordinary and exquisitely delightful must be concealed down there.

The long hours wore away, and the rose of dawn spread over the city.

The dying Prince had sunk again into a lethargic slumber, and lay like a log of wood beneath the stately gold and red of the baldachino. The sinister figures of Magliabecchi and Don Antonio, with that of the nun in attendance, were black silhouettes against the light of the wax candles. Castiglione, with a slight, irrepressible shudder, walked noiselessly across the great chamber and opened one of the windows. The beautiful radiance of earliest day shone through the cross-bars of its iron grating. He stood and looked out at the azure and opal hues of the sky ; his heart was heavy as though, with the death which was impending, there would go away from him all peace and power and plenty, instead of his fortunes being tripled and his liberty confirmed by it.

There was something in the manner of this death—silent, sardonic, supine as it was—which added to its awe and horror ; something which showed that human life was no more in the relentless passing of time than a felled tree, than a blasted rock.

‘If your most illustrious would like to retire, there is no immediate danger; the present state is likely to be again prolonged,’ whispered Magliabecchi, as he came to his side, creaking, with elaborate caution, in stiff shoes, over the mosaic floor.

Castiglione thanked him, and withdrew to his own rooms to take a bath and sleep for a little while.

Outside the bath-room Ruffino paused, and sat down. He never entered willingly where there was any rushing and splashing of water. Twice or thrice every year he was himself forced to undergo the indignity of being washed by the servants. He abhorred any sight or sound that even hinted at the abominations of soaps, and sponges, and streams, hot and cold, pouring out of taps. So he sat outside all bath-rooms, invariably, whilst his master chose to enjoy those things within. And whilst he sat here now, it seemed to him that the hand of fate pointed to a propitious hour for the safe exploration of the *Viccolo* of S. Anastasia.

The sense that the end of Montefeltro’s agony was very near made the household at once subdued and careless, preoccupied and inattentive. He had been a great man, in the sense of dominion and tyranny and possession, and his death was no slight event in his household and in his city.

It would bring many changes with it, and the functionaries and attendants and hangers-on, of whom the name was legion, talked with bated breath and anxious faces of the chances of their future. It was known that the heir had but little love for the 'black brood' which his father had fed and sheltered for so long. The chief cause of dissension between his father and himself had been their widely-differing estimate of these parasites and hypocrites, who led an indolent, useless, incumbering life, telling their beads and filling their bellies under the shadow of the great Montefeltro escutcheon.

There was no one, therefore, to observe or check his adventurous movements as Ruffino, knowing very well that he was doing wrong, trotted down the corridor, with his tail hung low, and his eyes looking from side to side with a very guilty apprehensiveness of remark.

The gates of the great entrance would surely be shut, he reflected, and it was of no use whatever to think of going out by that way; the back doors of the offices were too far off to make it wise to waste time in trying them on a mere chance of their being ajar; there was nothing really sure except to jump down into the lane from the loggia, and run the risk



of what the pointed, uneven stones might feel like when he got to them.

His mind once made up, he acted on it with the promptitude and decision which marked his character. He sped through the well-known apartments with the utmost swiftness; and although some of the under servants were polishing the massive floors, and dusting the walls and furniture, no one of them dared to stop him, and ask what he was doing. Ruffino's character was not one with which inferiors cared to take liberties. Whenever they attempted to do so, they repented it.

In less than a minute of time he coursed through the spacious and numerous rooms, all lying open to the soft, clear daylight, passed out on to the loggia and approached that western part of its balustrade which looked upon the longed-for lane: he had his moment and his means. A coward would have quailed; but Ruffino was of great courage, and knew neither timidity nor indecision. Even his habitual prudence and philosophic self-regard were forgotten in the intensity of curiosity and the overwhelming impulse to enjoy his liberty which had come like a delirium upon him. He put one paw over the stone parapet, and looked down: the descent was steep, the stones were sharp, the fall would be uncomfortable.

He surveyed the depth below with one foot in the air and both ears cocked. He hesitated, doubted, almost abandoned the enterprise; but in that one instant of irresolution he saw a cat—the same wretched, tall, scraggy, skeleton-like yellow-and-white cat he had so passionately loathed when he had seen her from above, and which now stood upon a doorstep, and seemed to his excited imagination to be grinning sardonically at his fears.

Ruffino paused and pondered no more; he put his other foot over, slid into the tangle of the tea-rose on the wall, and, rather scrambling down than leaping, let himself drop unresistingly on the rugged cobblestones below. Happily for himself, he fell on a heap of mouldy straw which had been pitchforked out of one of the miserable stables opposite, and he rose to his feet, stunned for the moment, and with the sensation of having had all the breath knocked out of his body, but otherwise unhurt, and sound in limb and wind.

His first thought was for the cat, but she was gone; the sight of his fall had scared her out of her senses, and sent her flying up the street. He stood a moment, and gazed up at his deserted loggia. How very far away it seemed!

Even Livingstone's and Burton's and Stanley's spirits may have quailed momentarily on first finding

themselves alone in a barbarous and unknown land. For one brief, ignoble instant Ruffino wished himself safe back on his cushion beside his master's breakfast-table, drinking his cream and tasting anchovy-toast and potted prawns. The next, as became his race, he shook himself with a snort of defiance, and surveyed the scene into which he had come.

He was a little shaken and dulled by the fall, which had been severe, although so greatly mitigated by the mouldy straw : he was not quite himself, not altogether so brisk, so self-possessed, so imperious of temper, and so conscious of important missions committed to him, as he had always been hitherto. And the aspect of the place was not as inviting as he had, when viewing it from above, imagined it to be. Two poor, lean, mangy mongrels were staring at him from a safe distance, and another cat, a grey-striped one, sat insolently aloft on the edge of a gutter, and peered over at him from that secure elevation. The house nearest him was a tumbledown place, scarcely more than a shed ; in the doorway a ragged woman sat stirring a pan of beans over a charcoal brazier, and behind her, on the dirty wall, hung cats' skins and rats' skins, and—horror of horrors!—dogs' skins too.

Ruffino understood that his master had been wiser than he had thought in forbidding him to approach

the precincts of this charnel-house. But although he was in himself disgusted and regretful, *bon sang ne peut mentir*, and he rose to the occasion. The delightful excitement which he had anticipated from the escapade seemed all, somehow or other, to have evaporated as soon as he had touched the stones; but it still remained incumbent on him to preserve his dignity, and call those impudent and plebeian dogs, who were staring at him so rudely, to account.

There was a noise and confusion in this narrow roadway which seemed to him altogether wrong and offensive; the whole scene reeked of filth and discomfort, two things odious to the well-ordered mind of Ruffino: and the refuse-heaps, which from above had looked so mysterious and tempting, were on close observation mere piles of foul dust, which had been searched through and through already by famished canine *canaille*.

He was so much disgusted that he barked offensively, imperiously, violently.

As much insult and scorn can be put into a bark as can be conveyed by a human sneer or frown: the bark of Ruffino was a trumpet-blast of defiance and disdain as gallant and fearless in its way as the blast from Roncesvalles.

It restored his own self-respect, but it made him



scores of enemies, as our pride is apt to do for all of us. Boys, who hitherto had not noticed him, shouted 'Brr—r—r—r! there's a fox-dog,' and shied stones at him; a mastiff, who belonged to a tripe-seller, came out of a shed with bristling back and stiffening tail; the two lean curs showed their teeth, the children yelled. In an instant the intruder, who had been unnoticed before, became the centre of curiosity, irritation, suspicion, malevolence; even the miserable yellow-and-white cat came out of her hiding-place, and arched her back, and spit at him from a safe distance.

But these antagonisms and offences roused all the temper of Ruffino to boiling-heat, and all his natural hauteur and high-handedness returned to him redoubled in intensity. He dashed into the cat, rolled her over, and shook her in the dust; then he bolted at the two staring curs, and hit out at them right and left, whilst they yelled in terror and shrieked for mercy; then, nothing daunted by the mastiff's enormous size and superiority, he went for him, his own little white body quivering with rage, his snowy ruff standing erect in fury, his black eyes blazing fire, his silver bells clanging and clashing violently. But the sinewy hand of the old woman who had been stirring the beans over the brazier clutched him by



the neck, whilst with her other hand she flourished her hot iron ladle.

‘Here Bau!’ screamed this woman to the tripe-man’s mastiff, warning him off. ‘Here Bau! The little one’s got a rare fur coat of his own. Don’t you throttle him, Bau, or you’ll spoil it for the trade. A knife’ll do his business neat and clean. I’ll slit his pipe and skin him in a brace of seconds.’

Ruffino, struggling like one possessed, hung helpless in the savage grip of the old witch: in vain he strove to free his throat and use his teeth; in vain he tried to curve his body in such wise that he could kick and scratch with his hind feet; in vain! in vain! She held him in a grip of steel, whilst she pulled his gold necklace roughly over his head, and then banged on to his poor little writhing body with the hot and heavy iron ladle.

In a few moments more the knife would have slit his throat, his gallant little spirit would have been quenched for ever, his pretty white coat would have been hung bleeding on a nail, and his body would have been thrown on to one of the refuse-heaps. But a good angel descended to his rescue.

‘It is the Duke’s little dog; you must not touch him!’ said a voice which seemed to fall from heaven on his ear; and a young girl, with not less courage

than his own, thrust her way through the barking dogs, the shouting children, the dust, the noise, and the cruelty, caught the woman's wrist with one hand, and with the other grasped Ruffino.

'It is the Duke's pet, I tell you. You must not touch a hair of his head. Give him to me; he is all bleeding; you have hurt him! You wicked people, you have hurt him!' said his defender, who looked like a young Saint Dorothea come down from a fresco of Raffaele, with her shining hair catching the sunlight, and her face flushed with excitement and a holy wrath.

The people and the children fell back, the uproar ceased; the woman involuntarily relaxed her grip on Ruffino, although she grumbled:

'The Duke? the Duke? What is the Duke to me? Get you along with your dukes. Let him pay me if he want the little beast back.'

'Pay you for trying to kill his dog!' cried the girl with indignation; but by this time she held Ruffino safely in her arms, and, not waiting to bandy more words, she clasped him, all bleeding as he was, to her breast, and ran indoors; into the little corner house where the herbs and vegetables, brooms and charcoal, filled the entrance.

Ruffino offered no resistance; he was half-stunned

by the blows of the iron ladle, but through his dulled perceptions a sense of safety thrilled ; he felt that he was in the arms of a friend.

She sped with him up the short, steep, stifling wooden stair, and entered her own room—that small, neat, bare, whitewashed chamber in which she painted her images by day and stitched her linen by night.

He knew very well that he was in that little corner house which was opposite his own beloved loggia, and he kept trying to rise, craning his neck to see the wall and the trees of his home out of the tiny window of the place in which he was, and whining and moaning in most piteous strain.

‘You want to go to your master, you poor little fellow,’ said his saviour, with compassion and sympathy. ‘If Volodia be awake, I will ask him what I had better do.’

She left Ruffino a moment, and went into the inner room, where on a low pallet-bed a youth was sleeping. His slumber was so tranquil and so deep, and his pale, worn face looked so peaceful in it, that she withdrew without making a sound which could disturb him, and stood a moment or two, thinking, and gazing at the little dog.

‘Poor Ruffino ! dear Ruffino ! how could you ever

be so foolish as to go down into that wretched lane !' she said tenderly, knowing his name from having heard it often called on the loggia by his master and his servants.

She laid him down on her bed, and with fresh water and some soft rags proceeded to wash his wounds. They were not deep, but they were numerous. The cat had scratched and mauled, the mongrels had bitten, the woman had bruised him, and he was bleeding in several places, though his thick coat had saved him from any mortal hurt. He allowed her, gratefully, to do what she chose to him, and lay motionless on the bed after drinking thirstily. In his soul he was profoundly humiliated : he had failed altogether in his explorations, and he had been ignominiously vanquished by his inferiors. No doubt, he thought, the wretched cat had picked herself up, and was sitting, grinning in triumph, somewhere ; whilst as for the woman !—a thrill of unspeakable rage and horror ran through his aching little body as he thought of her, and her hot iron ladle, and the dried dogs' skins hanging to the wall.

The girl touched him with the greatest care and tenderness, and also with a certain skill, as of one accustomed to suffering and its treatment, and would have made him a comfortable little bed upon her own

pillow. But Ruffino, as soon as his pain and mortification allowed him to become in any degree himself, was pining for his home and his master.

She had just decided in her meditations that, much as she disliked to approach the palace, she must carry the patient to the gates, and bid the porter there restore him to the Duke, when her patient, who could not use one of his legs, limping hurriedly, despite his wounds, to the casement, whined, howled, trembled, tried to mount, and failed, and showed every sign of violent agitation. The girl looked across at the loggia, and saw Castiglione, who was leaning down over the balustrade. Tragic as had been the events occurring in the time, the time itself had been brief; not more than ten minutes had elapsed since Ruffino's imprudent and perilous descent. Castiglione, upon leaving the bath-room, had missed his little friend, had dressed quickly, and had come to seek for him on the loggia; he was now looking up and down, whistling for and calling him by name.

The young girl caught the dog up in her arms, and held him up to the window.

'Sir,' she cried aloud, breathlessly, 'sir, he is quite safe, look! but he is much hurt; he had jumped into the lane, and the people were cruel. I have done all I could for him. He wants to come to



you, but he cannot ; he must not jump, he has been bleeding.'

All the while that she spoke Ruffino was struggling frantically to leap out of her arms, forgetful of his wounds. She struggled to retain him ; her hair was loosened in the combat, and fell about her shoulders. In her excitement she conquered her shyness ; agitation and interest gave colour to her cheeks, and animated her large, sad eyes ; she looked scarcely more than a child in years.

'I will come for him,' said Castiglione, deeply moved. 'How can I thank you for your goodness in defence of my poor little dog !'

'Thank me by not coming here,' said the girl, hastily. 'There is your garden-door ; I will put him in there, and you can take him. No, no ! I entreat you, Signor Duca, do not come here !'

She disappeared, as she spoke, from the casement, carrying the struggling Ruffino with her. In another instant Castiglione opened the postern-door, and met her there. But before he could address or detain, she put the little dog inside, and fled away.

'Do not follow me, pray do not !' she cried, as she ran away ; and there was so genuine an appeal in the accent of her voice, that he perforce obeyed her.

'She is afraid of the man who lives with her ; he

must be a jealous brute. There is excuse for jealousy, for she is lovely and interesting beyond compare,' thought Castiglione, as he stooped over Ruffino, and examined the wounds and the bruises which had punished his small friend's disobedience. Ruffino gave a long sigh of satisfaction: here was his garden, here was his master, he wanted nothing more; but he felt crestfallen, humiliated, subdued; he closed his eyes, and lay motionless in his owner's arms, to be borne gently up the marble stairs.

'Ah, Ruffi! I would never have believed that you would have left me under any temptation whatever,' said Castiglione: and this was the only reproach or rebuke which the culprit received.

All was well that ended well, and the wounds were not severe; the worse part of his injuries, to him, was that the detested Magliabecchi came and looked at them, and ordered one of the servants to wash them with arnica, and basely made them an excuse to try and administer a pill. To this last outrage, however, Ruffino was, even in his suffering, too much master of himself and of the position to submit; the dose was successfully resisted, and spat out into the leech's face.

His master, as soon as he had placed the truant in safety, and seen his wounds attended to, returned

to the loggia, only to find the wooden shutters shut at the little house, and all means of oral communication ended for the time. It was evident that, although she had rescued the dog, she had no intention of making her good action a means of increasing her acquaintance with his owner.

‘The sick man must be thrice over an Othello,’ he thought, and pondered on what he could do to testify his gratitude, and open the way to knowing and seeing more of her. Her beauty and her timidity fascinated him, and she had seemed to him still lovelier in the full morning light than she had done in the rays of the lamp and the moon. The courage too, which, on inquiring into the facts, he found that she had shown in saving Ruffino, had been of no common order. To have any one of so much charm and youthfulness so near him, and yet so completely severed from him, captivated the romance of his temperament, and awakened that kind of passion which finds root and increase in difficulty.

How could he recompense her? To offer her money was impossible. If he sent her any gifts at all, he foresaw that they would be sent back to him. He might aid her indirectly, but never directly. Besides, who was the man who shared her existence? who burdened it, or sweetened it, and, at all events,

in some way or other, usurped it? The memory of this unknown stranger poisoned his peace and tainted his memories of her.

The wooden shutters remained closed all that evening.

On the following morning, almost as soon as the sun rose, he returned to the loggia with an eagerness of anticipation of which he was half-ashamed.

The windows were open, but no one was visible.

‘Signorina! Signorina!’ he called, as loudly as he could without being overheard by the people in the lane, who were all standing about and gossiping of the past episode, and looking upward, anxiously, at the loggia, some afraid of the vengeance he would take, some furious with the girl’s interference, all passionately regretting that they had not recognised Ruffino, and so acted as to procure a large reward.

‘Signorina! Signorina!’ repeated Castiglione, softly, ‘will you not listen to me for one moment? Believe in my gratitude, at least, if you will not accept my friendship.

But he obtained no reply.

So far as he could see into them, the two little chambers were empty. He watched them in vain. He thought he could distinguish voices speaking in the inner room, but the sound was indistinct. He could

obtain no response, and he walked to and fro, on the black and white pavement of the loggia, restless and vexed.

At last he bethought himself of writing to her, and tying the note to a stone, and throwing it across. His consciousness of the extreme interest he took in her restrained him from sending any servant to the place. He went indoors, and wrote a few lines, expressing his deep sense of obligation for her rescue of his little favourite, and entreating her in return to command his services in any way ; he hinted that her burdens must be great, and asked for her confidence, and her permission to be of use to her. He signed it with his full name and titles, tied it to a small fragment of marble which was lying on the loggia, broken from one of the pilasters of the balustrade, and threw it, with a sure aim, in at the open window at which she had so often sat.

He heard it fall on the bare brick floor.

It was sent to a nameless woman, who, to all semblance, lived with another man ; it was not a prudent or a sensible action, but it was one which pleased him, and gratified the romantic side of his temperament.

And, after all, the service she had done him was great, for his regard for Ruffino was no



common liking ; the little, shrewd, devoted, clever creature was very dear to him, and for six years had been part and parcel of his life.

Ruffino himself, having now torn off all his bandages, and licked his wounds with his tongue, in a much surer surgery than Magliabecchi's, was walking after him, very stiff indeed, and with one leg useless, but absolutely refusing to stay on the cushion and wear the appliances ordered for him. His own way had proved a disastrous way to him for once ; but, for all that, Ruffino was not going to be dictated to by a quack.

So long as there was a vital spark alive in his body, he thought, he would resist such degradation as that. His beauty had gone for the time being : his coat was dirty, and smeared with bloodstains, which had been only imperfectly washed off ; one of his eyes had been scratched by the cat, and was temporarily closed ; and the useless limb had to be carried in an elevated and crooked position, which took from the dignity of his general appearance. But within his spirit was dauntless, although his pride was hurt. Gibed and grinned at by a cat, stared and mouthed at by mongrel dogs, seized by one woman, and saved by another woman ; all this was humiliation and mortification which made his tail

droop low indeed; but his soul was still undaunted within his breast, and he had torn up the arnica bandages into a thousand atoms, and had limped out after his master on to the loggia.

Castiglione watched till he was tired of watching, to see some one enter the room and pick up the letter, which he had purposely placed in a large envelope, and sealed with his arms, that it might attract attention. But no one appeared.

‘Your good angel is invisible, Ruffino; perhaps she has returned to the skies,’ he said to the little dog, who was busied in the endeavour to remove from his white coat every mark of his recent encounter.

Castiglione remained there until it was mid-day, and the marbles of the pavement were hot with the blaze of the sun which poured down through the cloth of the awnings. Then he went to his noon-day breakfast with a sense of disappointment and irritation.

He could appreciate the delicacy with which she refrained from every possibility of attracting his attention, or seeming to await his thanks for the service she had done to him. But he wanted extremely to increase his acquaintance with her, and learn who and what had brought her to earn her

bread so arduously in a strange land ; a strange land, for, although she spoke the language of the country fluently and faultlessly, there was that foreign accent on her tongue with which he was accustomed in the salons of Rome to identify Russians. It was probably because she was Russian that the people of the lane, and his own gardener, called her a pagan, and the picture which hung in the corner of her room was embossed with metal, and was, to all appearance, an Eikon. He had seen her on feast-days set a lighted lamp before it.

He was occupied all that afternoon by urgent matters of business, and by visits from great dignitaries of the Church, who could not be welcomed by subordinates. His father remained in the same state, and at any hour might pass away. Scores of persons were awaiting his orders, his directions, his answers to momentous inquiries. He remained all day indoors, and Ruffino, who was in much pain, although too proud to complain of it, stayed also in the great state-room where Castiglione received his visitors and applicants, and, curled up on a velvet armchair, lay eyeing enviously, with his uninjured eye, the silken-clad legs of the prelates and the priests : next to a cat and a doctor, Ruffino hated a churchman.

It was a beautiful day, warm without too great heat, golden, dreamy, and fragrant. Castiglione begrudged its long, light hours passed in the carefully-darkened room, under the domed ceiling painted by Pietro of Cortona with the processions of the Floralian games. He grew weary of the elaborate ceremonial of inquiry and condolence, of the long formal interviews, of the reiterated stereotyped phrases; and he shuddered to remember how many of these he would have to endure in the future.

He was as content as a released prisoner when at sunset his last visitor withdrew, and he was free at last to traverse the apartments and go out into the air. The hush and dew of evening were in the atmosphere as he went out on to the loggia, followed, as by his shadow, by the small, and now limping, figure of Ruffino. The honeysuckle and lime-blossom in the garden below poured out their fresh perfume, and met the heavy odours of the blossoming magnolias.

How many thousands of such nights our Rome has known! How many thousands of dead lovers, in such nights as these, living, have here declared upon each other's lips their loves eternal!

Castiglione approached the balustrade, and looked through the screen of the rose-foliage. He saw the



girl at the window, standing, as Beatrice Cenci may oftentimes have stood, steeped in the sweetness and the fragrance of the air.

She was, he thought, waiting there on purpose to see him, for she was not working: her lamp was unlighted, and her hands rested on the rough stone sill of the casement.

She started a little as she perceived his eyes looking at her, and heard his voice addressing her through the leaves between the marble columns.

‘You found my letter?’ he asked her, softly. ‘Pardon the rude fashion of its arrival for the sake of the sincerity of its contents.’

‘I found it,’ she answered, her voice reaching him in return, low and clear, across the chasm of the passage which divided them. ‘I thank you very much for what you say. I did but little for your dog, and there is no need that you should think of what I did for a moment.’

‘I rejoice to think of it,’ replied Castiglione, warmly. ‘It was a noble and courageous action. Let it be a strong and enduring link between us; will you not?’

The extreme sadness of her face grew still more pathetically grave as she shook her head.

‘There cannot be even any acquaintance between



us, Signor Duca. You are a great nobleman, and I am a poor person, a work-girl. I only speak to you to-night because it seemed so churlish, so ill-bred, to say nothing in answer to your generous words. But I beg you never to address me again. It is the only kindness you can do to me.'

'Why?'

'For a thousand reasons. You may have seen, or guessed, that I work for my bread, and—and I do not always gain it. If you notice me you can only hurt me. I have promised one whom I love dearly, and who has but little time left on earth, never to speak to you; and though I break the promise to-night in order to thank you for your letter, I do wrong, and I will never do it again.'

The words were quiet and resigned, but there was an intense hopelessness in their sound which was in dreary contrast with the youthfulness of the lips which uttered them.

'The man who lies yonder?' said Castiglione quickly, and with a sense of personal offence and anger. 'The man who is ill? It is he whom you care so much for. What is he to you? and why should he warn you against me, alone, of all the human race?'

'He is my brother, and he is dying. He did not

warn me against you especially. He made me promise when we came here never to speak to any strangers whatsoever.'

'Your brother!' said Castiglione, with a sense of relief and pleasure at his heart, which was succeeded by that vague scepticism which becomes second nature to men of the world. 'Is it your brother, then, who lives with you? Is it he for whom you toil so hardly? Tell me a little more. What country are you from?—Russian, if my ear does not play me false.'

'Yes, we are Russian. Volodia, my brother, is the Count Nelaguine. My name is Vera Nicolaievna. My brother was an officer of the Guard, but he became a Revolutionist; he was driven into Nihilism by the arrest and banishment to Tomsk of a dear friend; he would have been sent himself to Siberia if he had not left the country secretly. He brought me away with him, quite suddenly, one night. Our parents were dead, and our relatives were harsh, proud people, who abhorred his doctrines, and would not have raised a hand to save his life. We came to Rome because Volodia has great talent as a landscape painter; and for the first two years we could live fairly, though only in this little house. We had brought nothing with us except some pearls which I

had round my throat, for we had to fly at a moment's notice. But Volodia sold his sketches well, and we were happy. But six months ago he was caught in a thunderstorm on the Campagna; he was drenched to the skin; it brought on rheumatic fever, which left him stone-deaf, and his heart is weakened by it. I think he cannot live long.'

Her voice shook, and she was silent from the strength of her emotion. Castiglione was silent, too, from a sense of the utter insufficiency of any words to give her any consolation; he felt, no doubt, that she told the truth—there was a simplicity and a sincerity in the expression and utterance which forbade him to doubt her for a moment.

Standing by the window, with the light from the skies upon her face, she looked so young, and sad, and desolate, that any man who could have doubted her would, he thought, have been a monster.

'I am very sorry that you should have to bear such great sorrow so early,' he said at last; 'I can only repeat what I said to you in my letter—let me be your friend. Allow me to do for you what I can.'

She shook her head.

'Volodia would never consent. He would be very angry if he knew that I had even told you as

much as this. Your gardens, and the birds in them, have been a great comfort to me. Do not force me to shut the shutters; it is so dark and so dull then.'

'Force you to shut them? What can you mean? I am too rejoiced if you have gained any pleasure in this place.'

'I must shut them if you will talk to me. I cannot disobey Volodia. I think he is calling me now. Good night.'

'But surely I may come and see your brother?'

'Oh no, indeed! He would not see you if it were to save his life. Good night.'

'Wait; I will go away in a moment. On my honour I will go away. Only, for heaven's sake, have your window open this warm night.'

'Will you really go away?'

'I will really, if you wish it.'

'I do wish it. I mean—I must obey my brother.'

'I will go away this time, at all events. Enjoy the moonlight and the nightingales in peace. But I want to hear so much more, so many details. Would you write me your story, that I might understand it better?'

'Yes; I should think I might do that, if Volodia does not mind.'

‘Why should you tell him?’

‘I tell him everything.’

‘That is very honourable and noble of you. Heaven forbid that I should tempt you to any secrecy. But you must remember that sick men are often apt to be tyrannical, capricious, and unjust. At least, you must promise me that you will not shut your windows.’

‘I will not shut them if you also promise not to speak to me. I cannot disobey Volodia. He is helpless, and cannot see or know what I do.’

‘That is a delicate and noble scruple. I would not tempt you, if I could, to stifle your conscience. But it pains me to think that my mere presence should debar you from the enjoyment of looking on my trees and listening to my birds.’

‘We have been here three years,’ she said with a sigh, ‘and I think it has been the pleasure of these gardens and the sweet air from them which has kept me alive. No, I have never been into them. But that does not matter: I can see into them, I can see the birds making their nests, and I can watch the leaves budding and the flowers coming, and when there is no noise in the lane I can hear the splash of the fountains. You know, without a garden one cannot tell how the seasons come and go: those



tea-roses are a calendar ; the birds are like a clock. I can tell the weather, and the months, and the hours, all by the birds. Every moment that I can spare I spend in watching them. I wonder you are so much away from this beautiful place.'

'Alas! I have lost the fine sense that would make me content with these fair and innocent things,' said Castiglione. 'But it rejoices me that you have found such pleasure here. You have passed three summers in this place? Without change? Without fresh air?'

'It has not hurt me,' she answered; 'it has hurt Volodia. You know a young man frets and chafes so cruelly; a girl is naturally more patient. And then I learned to bear disagreeable things at the convent, and I was used there to long, dull days. He had always enjoyed himself, and only knew what it was to enjoy; it has been so much worse here for him than for me: he misses so much more, he needs so much more.'

'You have a generous heart,' said Castiglione. 'It is the fault of your brother that you have this misery to endure.'

'He cannot help it. He was drawn into these conspiracies. I think he sees now the uselessness and madness of them. But it is too late.'

‘How could he, an officer of the Guard, plot against his sovereign!’

‘Yes, it was disloyal; it was wrong and treacherous, perhaps: but the suffering of the people makes any extremity excusable in those who feel for them. You know, the worst excesses of Nihilism has a certain beauty; there is a great courage, and devotion to the nation; it is heroic, it is unselfish.’

‘You are more so.’

‘I? Oh no; I only do what must be done; and that comes to so little. I have no great talents; I am not like Volodia.’

‘But, unaided, you have maintained him for eighteen months.’

‘Yes, that was nothing. And I am disobeying him now, and that is wicked.’

‘You adore your brother?’

She hesitated, and he concluded that it was less affection than pity, habit, and duty, which chained her there.

‘He has no one but me,’ she answered, with a little colour passing over her pale cheeks. ‘I must go to him now, if you please. You will force me to shut the shutters.’

‘Why should you be afraid of me? I admire, revere, I——’

‘I am not afraid; I am not at all afraid now. But I have promised him.’

‘If you wait a moment, only a moment, I will bring you some flowers.’

He went into the salon, where he had had a bouquet of orchids and stephanotis put a little while before in readiness for what he wished to do with it if the occasion offered.

‘Catch!’ he cried to her; and he threw the delicate blossoms at her from the balustrade.

She caught them skilfully, and her pathetic, Cenci-like face flushed and lightened with childlike eagerness and delight.

‘You are very good to me,’ she said, simply. ‘But do not give me any more. Volodia would not like me to take them, if he knew. But I will tell him when he wakes that you meant well. Good night.’

‘Good night,’ said Castiglione, who would have fain followed the road that his orchids had taken, and been received as they were. ‘Good night, and do not forget your promise to write to me.’

She smiled—a smile which momentarily chased away the sadness of her face, and showed what it would look like were her fate a happy one.

‘I will write once, if you wish it so much. Adieu ; take care of the little dog.’

Then she turned from the window, and Castiglione, keeping his promise, went away with reluctant steps from the balustrade.

## VII

ONE person beside Ruffino had noticed the attraction which the loggia possessed for the future master of the palace ; and this was Don Antonio, the chaplain, whose rooms, contiguous to the chapel, looked on the lane, and, obliquely, to the loggia. He had imparted his information to his comrade, Magliabecchi, whose own apartment was far away, on the other side of the house ; and Magliabecchi had immediately taken the loggia under his observation. From one of the adjacent windows he kept an eye on Castiglione’s movements, and he saw that the Duke did indeed pass a great deal of time there ; and saw also, that the point of interest was evidently that little house which joined the convent walls.

The following evening, when he was watching, his quick eyes caught the sight of a letter tied to a stone being thrown through the creepers over the balustrade. Castiglione was safe indoors at dinner at

the time, and the physician, with a daring which would have become a better cause, stole out into the gardens, and from the gardens came up into the loggia, trusting to the shadows of evening to conceal him, and went with noiseless movements towards the balustrade. If only the dog inside would not bark, he thought.

Ruffino, inside, did hear, and did bark; but his master was dining, and did not attend.

So, stealthily glancing around him, Magliabecchi picked up the little piece of marble, undid the string, and read the note. Contempt and astonishment blended on his features. The contempt was for a man who, commanding all that the world could offer, could waste his time thus; the astonishment was that a girl who had nothing in the world could fail to avail herself of the advantage of having found favour in the eyes of such a man.

There is always one domain into which the rogue cannot enter, even in imagination: it is the domain of high and delicate impulses, of fine and generous sentiments. This region is to the rogue closed by an impassable barrier, and, when he fails, he fails for want of being able to comprehend the language which is spoken in this kingdom of the soul.

‘The girl must be an *archi-comedian*,’ thought



Magliabecchi; 'and our Duke is a fool, an exaggerated fool, as he has always been.'

Then he tied the note on to the bit of marble again, and put it back on the spot where it had been lying previously.

The note was signed by her full name, and that name struck a chord of remembrance in the busy brain of the doctor. He could not immediately recall what was connected with it, but somewhere, somehow, he had heard or seen it before. He stood in the moonlight pondering, his big, bloated, crafty face puckered up in meditation.

After a while he remembered fully, and he went indoors, into that chamber where it had been the habit of the dying Prince to conduct all his correspondence, and have all letters answered under his dictation by his secretary, or, occasionally, by Magliabecchi himself. Magliabecchi had duplicate keys of all the bureaus and cabinets in that suite of apartments, and had often laughed to himself, noiselessly, to see his master so carefully locking drawer after drawer, believing their sanctity inviolable.

He went now to one, and, opening it, took out several files of letters. He found what he wanted after some search. It was a letter from the French

Ambassador at St. Petersburg, an old friend of Montefeltro's, asking him to inquire for and befriend a young girl named Vera Nelaguine, who had shared the flight, for political reasons, of her brother, one of the Counts Nelaguine, and lately an officer of the Guard; the writer added that, for obvious causes, he could not be seen himself to stir in the matter, but would personally be glad if Montefeltro would find out these young people, who, as he understood, had hidden themselves in Rome, it was thought somewhere in the Trastevere.

The letter was three years old. On the back of it was written, in Montefeltro's stiff, small writing:

'Replied that I could not interest myself in revolutionists and persons of the Greek Church; no more heard of this matter.'

Magliabecchi slipped the letter in his pocket, put back all the others, and locked up the bureau.

He had no definite idea of what he could do with the paper, but in view of Castiglione's present caprice it was possible that it might be of value, either to keep or to destroy, as it was clear, unbiassed evidence of the right of the girl to the name which she bore. Magliabecchi's experience had always shown him that knowledge is always, in some way or another, a power.

Then he composed his countenance into the professional expression suited to the bedside of his illustrious master and patient, and took his way across the house to the Prince's rooms.

It was none of his business, indeed, if Castiglione made love to his neighbour; but Magliabecchi for forty years had made it his business to know everything that went on under the palace-roof, treasuring it all up for possible use, and deriving from it a pleasurable sense of omniscience and omnipresence. It was thus that, for a score of years, he had managed to keep in leading-strings which were unfelt and unseen, the haughty, suspicious, and tyrannical character of the Prince of Montefeltro, who, seeing in the doctor a minion, had in reality had in him a master.

Castiglione dined with little appetite this evening, and paid slight attention to the conversation of his cousin of the Guardia Nobile, who dined with him. His mind was entirely absorbed with what he had heard, and with the remembrance of the girl's face as she had given him that one brief, sweet smile, whilst the flush from the evening skies had fallen upon her.

All his own comfort and ease, and the luxury which surrounded him, seemed to him unkind and

unjust, as base evidences of the cruel inequalities of chance.

‘You are not well, my dear Ezzelino,’ said his cousin to him. ‘You are shut up too much. You should go out, and ride once a day, at least, over the Campagna.’

‘I am well enough,’ said Castiglione, with impatience; ‘and as my father may pass away at any moment, I cannot leave the house until the end of all has come.’

After dinner his cousin proposed *écarté*, and they played several games. The card-table was set out on the loggia, but Castiglione had it carried to the opposite end of the long terrace, on the plea that there might be a noise from the lane which would disturb them disagreeably. He was very absent-minded and inattentive, and lost almost every game.

‘Are you in love with one of the nuns of the Sepolte Vive?’ said his cousin; ‘you are abstracted enough to be Oliviero carrying on with Virginia de Leyva.’

‘Those times are past,’ he answered, angrily; ‘romance is dead.’

But in his heart he was passionately eager to pursue his own romance, and go and see if there were any letter for him lying by the balustrade.



When his cousin, having won a good deal of money from him, took his departure, Castiglione went to the marble chair, from which he had watched the windows of the little corner house. On the pavement was the same fragment of marble, to which his own letter had been tied, and a little note was fastened to it; the shutters of the corner house were open, but all was dark within.

He carried the note to the light which fell from a lamp suspended in the loggia-roof, and opened it with eagerness, unconscious that Magliabecchi had been beforehand in its perusal.

It was written in haste, and with much agitation, and was at once formal and simple; yet in its sedate lines there were that pathos and veracity which touched his heart as no lamentation and exaggeration would have done.

She did not add very much to the outlines of the history which she had already given him. She and her brother were of a noble family of the province of Esthonia; the young man had been an officer in the Imperial Guard, had been involved in Nihilist schemes, and, to avoid arrest, and a certain doom of either execution or lifelong exile to Siberia, had been forced to fly in disguise at a moment's notice; he had taken his sister with him, leaving



her no choice, and carrying her off from her first ball at the Winter Palace. They had been already three years in Rome; he had had talent as a draughtsman, and sold his sketches fairly well. One fatal day he had been overtaken by a storm of rain on the Campagna, when he had been heated by long walking; he had the malarian fever, and after that had been seized by rheumatism; he had never recovered the use of his lower limbs, and he was now stone-deaf. She coloured religious images by day, and sewed linen by night. The Russian doctor, Basilewsky, who lived in the neighbourhood, was, she said, very good to them; they wanted for nothing. On this point she was very resolute: they wanted for nothing; she repeated it again and again.

Of course, it was possible that all she had said and all she had written was mere acting, mere admirable acting; but he did not think so. Unseen, he had observed her laborious life, her constant exertions, her patient acceptance of a toil for which, visibly, neither her tender age nor her social conditions were fitted.

If her tale were true—and he did not doubt it—how profoundly pitiful was her fate! A fate so terrible that it was wonderful she should find such courage and such calmness to support it. And how

could he help her? He could perceive no way to do it, for he was certain that nothing which would seem a gift or an alms would be accepted either by her or by the young man who had dragged her down into this sordid and friendless existence.

In a postscript she added that the owner of the house, who at first had been unkind, had now consented to give them time to pay their rent. The letter concluded with thanking him for his offered kindness, but begging him to allow her to discontinue his acquaintance, as her brother disapproved even of her writing thus. It was signed by her full name: Vera Nicolaievna, Countess Nelaguine; and as a second postscript she had added: 'Pray take care of your dog, for he is venturesome.'

The whole note was written in French, in pure and elegant language, and its style was calm, direct, and simple, plainly narrating facts, and seeking no theatrical effect.

'They want for nothing, she says!' thought Castiglione. 'Good Heavens! what an heroic lie! What can one do in the face of such a declaration? They want for nothing, while every hour of her existence is toil or misery! What a brave child! The soul of St. Agnes is in her, with the face and the body of Beatrice.'

He read the note again and again by the light of the lamp, whilst the songs of the nightingales, singing in rivalry, came clear and strong from the dusky gardens.

Then he sat down and wrote back a reply to her, and when it was written went down the staircase into the grounds beneath, bidding Ruffino stay above. He went to the farthest end of the great gardens, where the tropical glass-houses were, and entering one of them, made a bouquet with his own hands of the finest gloxinias blossoming there, carried the flowers upstairs, tied his letter to them, and threw them across, in at the open window of the little darkened house.

It was a rude passage for the hothouse blossoms, and they were sadly bruised as they struck on the cold brick floor; but she would be sure, he thought, to find them there some time that night, and, as she was so fond of flowers, they would please her.

‘She was your good angel, Ruffino,’ he said, as if to excuse himself to his four-footed friend for so sentimental an act. Ruffino, who was more occupied with the wrongs done him by the arnica, and the unavenged insults of the yellow cat, licked his bruises, and made no response.

The episode had been a painful one to his body and to his spirit; he wished to make haste to get well, and forget all about it, being convinced of the wisdom of the advice, '*Oubliez ! oubliez ! C'est le secret de la vie.*' All the same, he meant to pay off his enemies with interest some time, and he equally intended to befriend his saviour, if the occasion occurred.

Castiglione read the note once more, and then, again, a third time.

'I will send in the morning for this Doctor Basilewsky,' he said to himself, as he watched the dark, open window through the leaves.

In half-an-hour's time he saw her enter the little chamber, bearing a very faintly-burning little lamp, which threw no light around her. He saw her stop and stoop, then saw her lift the gloxinias from the floor, and hold them up to the light in astonishment; then, hurriedly, she closed the shutters, and he saw no more; but he strove to be content with the fact that she had kept his flowers.

It was then midnight.

With early morning he sent for the old Russian doctor; a small, dark, aged man, with an ugly, intelligent countenance, who was much amazed and disturbed at the summons to the Montefeltro Palace.



He was an obscure person, an exile, and wholly unknown beyond the poorer classes of the foreign students.

Castiglione met him with a charming urbanity which put him at his ease very soon, and told him candidly that what he had observed and guessed of the pressing needs of his poor neighbours made him desirous to ascertain all he could about them, with the hope of alleviating their troubles.

Basilewsky was willingly communicative. He confirmed the statement of the young girl: her family was of high rank; her brother a self-exiled revolutionist, who had only escaped the scaffold or the mines by flight; their parents were dead, and the other branches of their family would have nothing to do with them; their estates and all they possessed had been forfeited to the State. The young man, he said, was obstinate, wayward, talented, and was wearing his soul out of his body by impatience at his calamity and shame at his dependence on his sister. Of her he spoke with tears in his eyes: it was impossible to praise her too highly; all the mute heroism, the saintly endurance, of which the Russian character is capable, were at their finest and fullest essence in her. He had known her all the three



years that she had been in Rome, and he had never heard a murmur from her lips.

She had great cause of reproach against her brother, who had dragged her into exile and misery when he might have left her in peace in her own land; for she had been only sixteen years old, and fresh from her convent, and her relatives would have dowered and married her well if she would have detached her fortunes from his. But he had never heard her utter a word of blame or of repining, and he believed that she had never spoken or hinted one to her brother.

‘And he is content to live on what she gains?’ said Castiglione, with disgust.

Basilewsky smiled mournfully.

‘Content? What can he do? His limbs are useless, and he is stone-deaf. He suffers agonies of shame and of remorse; but that is no use. He cannot undo what he has done, and he cannot rise off his bed, or gain a crust of bread, with his crippled hands. He would kill himself, were it not for the misery that he knows his suicide would cause his sister.’

‘But is his malady incurable? If he is so young, there may surely be hope?’

‘It is incurable when allied to poverty. Perhaps,

if he had means to move, to go to Royat, Mont Doré, Champel, Contrexeville—any one of those places where miracles of recovery are wrought—such a miracle might take place for him. But he cannot stir out of this city, out of that house. He can have nothing that he needs. She starves herself to give him the best she can, but that best is poor indeed. He grows weaker and weaker; he cannot last long.'

'It is dreadful,' murmured Castiglione, strongly affected by the desolate and hopeless story. 'It is frightful. I would do anything that was possible. Would they not accept——?'

'The man will accept nothing until he draws his last breath,' replied Basilewsky, 'and the girl will never disobey or deceive him. We cannot quarrel, my lord duke, with these qualities; it would be well for the world if they were more general.'

'Certainly. But——'

'There is no "but," sir,' said the old man. 'They are proud people, nobly-born people; they will perish miserably before they will take an alms or live on others.'

'But that is suicide.'

'Our nation sees no harm in suicide. In this

case it would be a more honourable choice than life lived on the bread of strangers.'

'Then you will not urge on him or on her to allow me to do for them this common charity?'

'No, my lord; I must decline the office.'

Castiglione was perplexed, distressed, and irritated.

'What mule-heads of obstinacy!' he said, with anger and regret. 'Fine! Yes, it is fine, but there is no sense in it; it is suicide, and it is murder. The young man will die, and the girl will follow him to the grave from over-work and scanty food. He will kill her with his insane exaggeration and monomania. We could save her, and we could save him. I would get him the advice of the first physicians of Europe. I would send him to Mont Doré, or any other place, to be cured, and he would probably recover. Does he ever think, in his heroics, what may be the fate of that child when he shall have left her on the earth all alone, friendless, penniless, with a broken heart and ruined health?'

It seemed to him that the dying youth was a monster of false sentiments and selfishness.

'Can nothing persuade this young madman that I am not an ogre or a monster?' he said, impatiently.

'He shuts his sister up because I have spoken to

her across the wall. It is intolerable! I would be their friend in any way they would allow. I will send him wines, fruits, meats, medicines—anything. I will send a portable chair for him, and my men can carry him into these grounds to have the air in the early mornings, or after sunset. Cannot you persuade him of my willingness, of my good faith? He may have a right to kill himself by inches, if it pleases him, but he has no right to starve his sister to death, and refuse all honest assistance.'

The old man listened deferentially, but replied that it was impossible to alter a stubborn and rooted prejudice; a wrong-headed conviction that in obstinacy lay honour.

'He considers that to accept your kindness would be a disgrace,' he added; 'he will die in that hole yonder sooner than grasp any stranger's hand to raise him out of it. It is a false view of honour, in my esteem, but it is his view, and we cannot alter it. The girl must suffer from it. We can do nothing.'

'She shall not suffer, if there be a heaven above us!' said Castiglione, with a passionate irritation at being powerless to force his benefits on a sick and headstrong lad. It hurt him intolerably to look at those closed shutters, and to know that this gentle



child, who loved light and flowers, and the voices of birds, was behind them, working laboriously in the gloom, deprived of her one solace.

‘You are a great lord, a great prince,’ said Basilewsky, ‘but there is one thing which you cannot do—our Tzar could not do it—you cannot turn away a high and delicate spirit from the paths of sacrifice and honour!’

‘Sacrifice and honour! Folly and suicide, you mean!’ said Castiglione, beside himself with rage and the chafing sense of his own impotence.

He had, at least, been able to keep their roof over their heads; but he had no doubt that, were they to know that, for his interference they would curse him. Honour was a noble thing, and a rare one in modern life; but this view of it seemed to him a morbid exaggeration, a criminal folly. The girl was a victim of her brother’s quixotism and selfishness.

He wrote to her a third time.

‘It requires a greater nature sometimes to accept than to give,’ he said in his letter; ‘will yours not be great enough to confer upon me the simple and innocent pleasure of restoring, or trying to restore, your brother to health and strength? I have seen Basilewsky, who tells me that there would be hope for him if the right measures were taken. I shall



esteem it an infinite favour if you will allow me to be the means of giving back to your brother the enjoyment of life and of youth. I am a stranger to you, but all Rome will tell you, and him, that no one has ever repented having placed their trust in me. Command me in any way you will, and I shall be honoured by your confidence.'

He hesitated as to the way of conveying this note to her: he was afraid that, if he threw it, the action might be seen by some one passing under the wall: and yet it seemed preferable to him to risk this than to send it by a servant, who would inevitably gossip about the errand he had done. After some indecision, he chose the former way: he found another fragment of marble, and flung it, with the writing attached, into the room opposite, at a moment when there was no one in sight below. The interest of his new acquaintance possessed him entirely: it had come into his life at a moment of ennui and solitude like a little song in a silent chamber, like a jewel found on a flat and marshy shore. The thought that, with all his possessions, all his social influence, all his wide estates, he was powerless to force his friendship on a dying boy and a friendless girl, seemed to him a grotesque irony of fate.

He remained in his apartments without ap-

proaching the side of the loggia from which he could watch her windows ; he wished to leave her in perfect liberty, and not take from her such simple consolation as she was able to find in the air, and the fragrance, and the birds of his gardens.

Ruffino was glad that he should be thus inactive, and thus remain in the library, in lieu of the loggia, for his own wounds were still unhealed, and made locomotion disagreeable to him, and one of the deep, soft velvet chairs more pleasant than the marble pavement. Besides, he had no doubt that the yellow cat was sitting aloft, on some rain-pipe or house-eave, waiting to witness and enjoy the spectacle of his crippled state.

About ten o'clock, as Castiglione, tired of pacing to and fro in the silence and splendour of the vast library, was about to seek his own rooms, the major-domo came to him to inform him that the physicians feared the worst from his father's present state, and doubted if he would outlive the night. He went once more to the sick chamber, and there remained while the slow-passing hours were tolled from the bells of Rome. He saw and felt that this lingering, feeble flicker of existence must soon lapse into the sadness and rigidity of death itself. He fell asleep himself, now and then, in the great chair in which

he sat; but rarely, and he heard all the hours toll from the many church-clocks around.

The waxlights burning in the silver sconces shed a soft, pale light on the immovable form stretched beneath the great gold-and-purple canopy of the bed where, for three centuries, the Princes of his house had breathed their last; even when a Lord of Montefeltro had fallen in battle or in a duel, his body had been always brought and laid there in state upon this bed for all his retinue and dependents to come and do him their last act of homage.

The time seemed interminable: the watching Sisters counted their beads, and whispered their paternosters; Magliabecchi ever and again moistened the lips of the dying man, or held a mirror to them; Don Antonio, with his hands folded across his ample paunch, dozed and prayed, and dozed again, and held his crucifix between his folded fingers, now and then, as he nodded, letting it sink limply from his hold, and then awakening himself and recovering the holy object with a nervous grasp. Ruffino slumbered, or seemed to slumber, at his master's feet; his black eyes, half-closed, glanced ever and again at the churchman and the leech, whom he hated. On the air there was that faint, oppressive scent of drugs, of anodynes, of anæsthetics, which medicine-men love

to diffuse around a sick-bed, even when the sufferer who lies on it is far beyond the aid of stimulants or the solace of sedatives.

Castiglione felt the oppression of the atmosphere ; and the confused memories and desires of a new-born and ill-timed passion were warm in his veins and busy in his mind.

The fleeting, sweet smile of the girl's soft brown eyes, liquid and deep as flowing waters, and of her tender lips, the same colour as the pale Malmaison carnations blossoming in his gardens below, was for ever before his memory, even in this solemn and melancholy scene. He could not shake off the impression which she had made on him ; he could not forget her heroic, innocent, wretched life passed there within a stone's-throw of his palace ; he could not persuade himself that what he felt for her was a mere passing caprice, a mere impulse of admiration, such as he had felt a thousand times.

All those many hours in which he had watched her, himself unseen, had sunk indelibly into his remembrance, and touched his heart to the quick. It seemed to him as if she were a part of the summer skies, the nightingales, the flowers ; as if she had, in the words of the Spanish poet, entered his soul through his eyes, never to be driven forth from it.



‘I love you! I love you!’ he thought; ‘if you be what I think you, I will give you all I have.’

As he sat in the silent chamber, the things of the world seemed very poor and useless to him, and the joys of the heart seemed the only treasures which were worth the seeking, or were likely to endure.

### VIII

WHEN the bells around tolled five of the clock he arose, as he had done in the other nights of his vigil there, and walked across the quiet room, and drew the curtains aside from one of the windows, and opened it, so as to let the earliest white light of day into the chamber. Then he went out, to cross the house to his own apartments.

For the first time in their lives he was not followed by Ruffino.

Ruffino, withdrawn from observation behind the heavy bullion fringes of the draperies of the bed, was intensely watching Magliabecchi, and remained beneath the curtains, letting his master leave the apartment without him. So quiet and so motionless had the little dog been for so long, that the physician and the chaplain had alike forgotten that their arch-enemy was there.



As soon as Castiglione had gone out of sight and hearing, Magliabecchi, who was standing by the bed, turned, and said to the nun in attendance :

‘My Sister, retire for a while ; Don Antonio and I are sufficient for this morning watch ; praise be the Lord, our beloved patron sleeps.’

The nun, willing to obey, made but feeble resistance, and soon left the room. Magliabecchi looked at the now widely-awakened eyes of Don Antonio.

‘Is it near?’ whispered the chaplain.

‘It is the end,’ murmured Magliabecchi.

Valets and servants were keeping vigil in the adjacent room. The doctor softly closed the great door opening on to the place where they sat. The chills of dawn were dangerous.

An hour went by ; the dawn broadened into day, and the clear, limpid rose-light of morning came into the room, and fell, through the purple curtains of the bed, on to the face of the dying man. There was a look upon it which was not that of sleep. Don Antonio was the first to observe it, and twitched the sleeve of his colleague, who was dozing with his chin on his breast. Magliabecchi started, and rose, and bent over the bed, raised the eyelids, and laid his fingers on the pulse.

‘Gone at last!’ he murmured to the chaplain.

‘Hush ! call no one ; there will be time ; we are alone.’

Then, quick as thought, he raised the head of his dead master with no gentle hand, lifted the pillows on which it had rested, and took two keys which were beneath it ; secret keys, of fine workmanship, of which he knew well the destination. Then, with rapid steps, followed closely and noiselessly by the ecclesiastic, he stole silently to an iron safe contained in an ebony cabinet, moved the hands of its dial to form the letters necessary to unclose its bolts, and turned the key in the lock.

Inside the safe were many other keys, quantities of bonds and scrip, and heaps of gold wrapped up in bits of old paper and old envelopes ; there were also uncut diamonds and other gems. The whole amount was of great value.

‘There is not time for anything else,’ he whispered to the chaplain ; ‘but these cannot be missed—nothing is known of them by any living soul.’

And he proceeded to stuff the jewels and the packets of gold-pieces into his inner pockets, whilst Don Antonio did the same. But they had reckoned without one witness : from where he lay hidden under the bed, Ruffino, with only three legs to serve

him, but with the speed of lightning in those three, forgetting his wounds, his bruises, and his stiffness, sprang upon the doctor, and seized him by the ankle.

All the wrongs of the past—the oil, the arnica, the threatened pills, the black looks, the sly cuffs, the smothered hatred—all that he owed to Magliabecchi, were paid off now, as he pinned his adversary's ankle-bone as in a vice, clinging hard and fast, whilst Magliabecchi shrieked and Don Antonio fled, and the chest lay open, with its jewels and gold and bonds in a confused heap, within its yawning iron jaws.

The servants, awakened from their drowsy vigil in the ante-room, rushed in; but no one dared touch the little dog, who having at last got his own and his master's foe well within his grasp, would have allowed his body to be pulled asunder rather than leave his hold at any hireling's command.

'Murder! Murder! Help!' shrieked the physician, delirious with terror. 'Take him off! Shoot him! Brain him! He is mad! He has gone mad, I say! Help! Help! Help!'

But the servants stood together, frightened, motionless, some grinning to see his plight, some guessing his attempted crime, all afraid to risk the teeth of Ruffino for themselves.

'Call the Duke! Call the Duke! He alone can

take off the dog !' cried one of the varlets ; whilst Magliabecchi, yelling and cursing hideously, struggled to free himself, and in his frantic efforts to shake off Ruffino shook out the precious stones, and the gold ducats, and the loose letters from his coat pockets upon the floor.

'What is all this ?' said the voice of Castiglione behind the confused and inactive varlets. 'Ruffino, let go !'

At that moment, unsummoned, he had entered the chamber, and seeing the open cabinet, the disordered papers, the terrified man, the avenging dog, comprehended at a glance what had happened.

'Ruffino, let go ! Come here, do you hear me ? Come here !' he said to the little dog ; and looked at the thief, and from him glanced to the cold, still figure on the bed.

'You have robbed my father forty years in life ; could you not respect him even in death ?' he said, in a low voice ; then he made the sign of the Cross, and knelt down by his father's corpse.

Ruffino had let go his hold, with sad reluctance, at the word of command, and stood, breathless and panting, pride, hatred, and satisfied vengeance swelling his little soul with glory ; whilst the servants, surrounding Magliabecchi, pinioned his

arms, and held him fast from all possibility of escape. A solemn silence fell upon the chamber whilst the son was kneeling by his father's death-bed: the rays of the sunrise, slanting through the panes of the lofty windows, illumined the pale, startled faces of the household; the dark, knavish, terrified countenance of the thief; the diamonds, rolling and shining on the mosaic floor, the gold crown and arms of the baldachino.

In a few moments Castiglione rose, and motioned to the household to leave him alone.

'Let the rogue go,' he said to them, 'but put him out of the gates, and see that he never enters them again.'

Then he stooped, and stroked Ruffino.

'Thanks, little one; you were wiser than we.'

Magliabecchi, as the servants pushed him to the door, turned, and looked back with longing eyes at the room where he had so long vaunted himself master of life and of death.

'Don Antonio is as guilty as I,' he said, as he was thrust from the chamber by the lacqueys; he could not even be true to the man who had schemed with him, robbed with him, shared with him, through so many years of plenty and of plunder.

'Fear not; your accomplice shall have his



deserts,' replied the man who was now his master; and then he shut the massive doors on them all, and remained alone with the dead body, Ruffino reverently watching by his side.

And without, a great awe fell upon the household, for they knew that the new lord would set crooked ways straight, and have gorged maws cleared, and would sweep away the carrion crowd who had settled there, feeding and fattening, like crows upon a rotting carcase, on the credulity and suspicion, the bigotry, and the superstitious fears of their dead master: the conscience was clear of few of those who dwelt beneath that roof.

The forty-eight hours which followed were full of those painful and oppressive duties and ceremonies with which the death of a great person is followed for his heir and successors: the obsequies of a Prince of Montefeltro were always as magnificent as those of a Prince of the Church.

The etiquette, the ceremonial, the splendour, the formality were very burdensome to him on whom the onus of them fell, and seemed to him unending. All the members of the family, and of the other great families to which the deceased had been allied, flocked thither to greet his successor as the chief of the house, and pay their last respects to the corpse of

the dead lord. All patrician and ecclesiastical Rome passed through his palace-gates.

When at length the coffin, draped in velvet, with a prince's gold crown resting on it, was left in the mortuary-chapel, to be taken, later on, into the mausoleum of the castle in the Abruzzi which had been the mountain-stronghold of his race, Castiglione, now Prince of Montefeltro, was left for the first time in peace.

It was peace which would speedily be broken by a thousand demands and duties thrusting on him from all sides ; but for the time being he was alone, and could breathe freely, and realise all the changes which the last three days had brought about : he was absolutely his own master, and arbiter as well of many lives and many lands.

‘I will do what I can to do good to the people, and bind myself neither to Church nor State,’ he thought : and it is the only resolve which a man can take which has any true wisdom in it ; for the Church and the State alike emasculate and imprison those who remain subject to their dictations.

But it was a prospect which had its terrors for a lover of ease, of pleasure, and of day-dreams. He knew well the mass of corruption which covers the whole administration of property in Italy, and

lives like an ulcer in the flesh in the whole of the national existence. In the endeavour to administer all which would come to him honestly, justly, and with true benevolence, he knew that he would be plunged up to the throat in a quagmire of moral filth, from which it would be difficult to emerge without being odious to the many human creatures who crawled and basked and had their paradise in its slime. He was by temperament and character disposed to like repose and indolence and amusement, and the vista of intricate and arduous duties which opened before him in the twilight of the future, on the threshold of which he stood, was oppressive to him.

For many centuries the stewards, and accountants, and writers of the Casa Montefeltro had sat in the great stone chambers of the ground-floor allotted to them, and spun their financial records, like spiders weaving webs, undisturbed and unquestioned. From time to time, when their lord of the moment had wanted money, he had sent for his head steward, and said : ' I want so much ; see that it is ready.' And ready it had always been, in every century, supplied unfailingly, no matter what pressure or what difficulty had gone to the procuring of it. So long as the men-of-business were never asked how they got it, they got it cheerfully, squeezing it out of the land, or the

dwellers upon the land, and quite content so that they could themselves pocket whatever they chose. Folio on folio were piled in the muniment room, yellow and dusty, filled with crabbed characters and millions of cyphers : to the eye the accounts of the house of Montefeltro, like the accounts of every great Italian family, were kept with perfection and exquisite exactitude, the smallest fraction being duly recorded and accounted for. But all these fair rows of figures and precise balancing of receipts and expenditures have never prevented, have only smoothly covered, that gigantic system of daily robbery by which the fortunes of these families are undermined by their underlings as secretly and surely as Eastern timber by white ants.

Castiglione knew that this system could only be successfully uprooted and destroyed at the cost of long and painful effort, and by the acceptance of infinite odium and misconception ; and he knew that the cleansing of this Augean stable was the first clear, inexorable duty which stood out before him in the future. To stop the extortion in the land, he must first check and choke the robbery of the administrators.

‘And I am no Hercules, to cleanse this filth and strangle this python,’ he thought, ruefully. His



father had let matters go on thus partly out of fear, partly out of the sense that it was in the main serviceable to himself, because, only so long as he allowed these parasites to gorge would they suck the blood of others at his bidding. But the idea of turning to his own profit a system so cruel and iniquitous revolted the new lord.

The days seemed long, dull, and empty.

He had, indeed, many affairs to attend to, and many persons sought audience of him. He was all-powerful now, and would be so hereafter; all the innumerable connections, parasites, and pensioners of the Casa Montefeltro were eager to propitiate the rising sun, and were ready to worship him with that form of gratitude which has been designated as a lively sense of favours to come. But all this was uninteresting to him, and was often disgusting, by the mean aspects of human nature which it revealed; and the loggia, with its fragrance of flowers and harmony of birds and waters, seemed like a haven of rest to him after the mean servility and cringing avarice of many of his visitors.

Custom had prescribed that he must not leave the palace whilst his father's body was lying in state upon the bed where he had died; but at night, when sure that he was not observed, he had gone out on



to the terrace, and looked at the corner house. The shutters had always been closed, and the clear, white moon-rays had streamed on them without entering within.

It disquieted and pained him to see no sign of life there.

Was the young man dead? Was his faithful companion ill? Had they both, by some miracle, fled away, and gone elsewhere to hide their silent misery?

Ruffino, who disregarded his injuries in the joy and triumph which he felt in having at last been even with his hated enemy, went out after him, and looked also at that little house. His supreme mission—the confusion and annihilation of the physician—having been so thoroughly fulfilled, he had leisure to think of other things, and, amongst them, of the debt which he owed to the girl yonder. Ruffino hated women almost as much as he did cats; but he did not allow his prejudices to obliterate his sense of gratitude. But for her he knew that his skin would be, ere now, hanging on a nail in that horrible den below. He would have liked to show his feelings, and prove that he had a soul filled by that sentiment of gratitude which is so much stronger and more lasting in dogs than men; he would have liked to jump

through her window, and thank her; but the shutters were always closed, and it was impossible.

‘She will not accept anything, Ruffino, nor believe in our good faith,’ said his master; and Ruffino, a little stiff in the loins, and somewhat ragged in appearance, sat down before the tea-rose foliage, and said, repeatedly and irritably: ‘Wuff! wuff! wuff!’

When both he and his master wanted her, why should she persist in concealing herself?

The yellow cat was crawling over the roof in odious ostentation and staring conceit.

That day, and the next, and the next, the shutters were still shut.

Castiglione was infinitely distressed. He missed the supreme interest of his days, and it pained him exceedingly to think that she was deprived of the pleasure which the waving of the trees and the singing of the birds had afforded her in all the cooler hours.

He threw a pebble several times at the wooden bars, but without obtaining any response. Then he abstained entirely from approaching that side of the loggia, and only Ruffino thrust out his little white head through the foliage to look into the lane which had cost him so dear.

On the evening of the sixth day after his father's burial, Castiglione, wearied, perplexed, and disappointed, telling himself that he would leave Rome on the morrow, for the first time remembered that it would be as well to look at the various papers and precious stones which had been dropped from Magliabecchi's pockets, and which he had hastily thrown back into the cabinet whence they had come, without examination of them, when the lawyers had affixed their seals, as to all other drawers and desks. The seals were now broken, and the contents belonged to himself. He traversed the great, silent house to the room where his father had died, the waxlight which he carried with him shedding its faint light before his feet, and leaving all the vast apartment in deep gloom. He opened the drawer, and took out the uncut diamonds and rubies, and the three or four letters which had fallen from the rogue in his flight. The jewels were of great value, the letters of no interest, except the one which he took up; that was the letter from St. Petersburg, with the memorandum written in his father's writing.

He read it again, and yet again. It caused him at once pleasure and pain: pleasure at the witness which it bore to his neighbour's veracity, pain at the knowledge that, through his father's bigotry and

hardness of heart, three years of useless suffering and want had been caused to this hapless child.

‘Oh, Ruffino, what a wise little dog you were to stop that villain!’ he said, as he locked up the jewels again, and put this Russian letter into his coat-pocket.

Ruffino, sitting bolt upright, blinking at the candle, gave a little sound, half-sniff, half-snort, which meant in its own language :

‘Wise!—of course I was wise. It is for their superior intelligence that dogs are hated and hunted by human jealousy. You thought the man a rogue, indeed, but you did not think him so until I had told you of it again, and again, and again; and though you knew he was a rogue, you allowed him to insult me with arnica, and he would also have poisoned me with a pill but for my own discretion, which you considered obstinacy and disobedience.’

His master, who did not understand the language of these just reproaches, sat awhile, lost in thought, beside the jewel-cabinet, until the wax candle, unsuited to the draught of air in that great chamber, burning furiously, expired before its time, and left him in darkness. Then he arose, and feeling his way through those familiar rooms, passed out into a vast corridor, where the rays of the moon

were falling full on the Olympian gods and Thracian shepherds of the frescoed walls, and went back through the silent house to his own apartments.

In the morning he sent for the old man, Basilewsky, and in vain renewed all his proposals and all his arguments.

‘Papers have come into my hands which corroborate the truth of the history which you have told me; and it is frightful,’ he said, earnestly, ‘frightful to think that this young man will die in his obstinacy, and drag his sister down into the grave after him. There should be some law against such indirect murder and self-murder. You will be guilty as an accomplice if you will not take this madman any message from me.’

‘I am sorry that you blame me, sir,’ said the old man, meekly. ‘But I cannot act otherwise. He is intractable, and tenacious, as cripples and deaf people are. He is aware that he has ruined his sister’s present and future. If I were to irritate and offend him, he would forbid me to go there, and she would be deprived of my poor services. Besides——’

He hesitated a little, and then resumed:

‘Pardon me, your excellency, if I speak with what may seem to you a brutal frankness; but in such a moment candour is permitted. You are a



very great person, of illustrious rank, of large fortune; no offers of assistance could be accepted from you by these people, nor could I make myself your ambassador to them. That your motives are pure, I have no doubt; but who would believe that? A man of your rank and of your age could not possibly befriend a girl like the Countess Vera without creating a position which, you must grant, no man belonging to her could possibly permit or profit from without disgrace.'

'No, I do not see it; I deny it, I deny it utterly,' said Castiglione, with great anger. 'It requires a finer nature to accept benefits than to confer them. I see that your invalid and yourself have both low, ungenerous, base views of human nature; and as my views and feelings are honest, and with neither egotism nor infamy behind them, I resent your suspicions as an affront; and if you let this mad youth perish in his pride because you cannot bring yourself to believe in the truth of what I say, you will have killed him as certainly as though you cut his throat; and you will have killed her, too, for she cannot long resist so unnatural, so cruel, so miserable a life!'

He was passionately angry: he had been too used to have his whims and wishes obeyed to encounter opposition without amazement and indigna-

tion ; the goodness of his heart made any doubts as to his motives appear to him the most intolerable of outrages ; and, beyond all these purely personal feelings, there was the extreme pain of knowing that, do what he would, this child, with her soul of St. Agnes and her face of Beatrice, was leading the most wretched, poverty-stricken, and laborious life—a life which might at any moment fatally overcome the weakness of her sex and youth.

Her brother was a madman, Basilewsky was a monster, and she was as cruelly sacrificed to them both as any maiden to the Minotaur of old.

Later in the day he asked for and obtained with the Minister for Foreign Affairs an audience at the Consulta, and afterwards an interview with the Russian ambassador. He was given full confirmation of the truth of their story, and of their identity with the young exiles who had been recommended to his father's pity ; but when he further pressed for some clemency, some intercession which should restore the youth to his rank and to his country, he was met by a polite but peremptory refusal. The offence had been too grave : criminal in all, in an officer of the Imperial Guard the revolutionary principles and intrigues were high treason which should have been punished by the gallows. Not all his influence and

entreaty could induce the Muscovite envoy to promise him the slightest possibility of pardon.

‘Well, it does not matter,’ thought Castiglione, as, after these fruitless efforts, he took his way back to his own palace, Ruffino, who had now recovered the use of his fourth leg, trotting beside him, shaking his silver bells. ‘It does not matter,’ he repeated between his teeth. ‘I will marry her; and then this wretched youth shall be cured, and provided for, whether he chooses or no.’

The verification of the absolute truth of her narrative had removed from his mind for ever those vague doubts and fears, which had assailed him at times, lest the romance of his temperament and the personal beauty of his young and hapless neighbour should hurry him into an uneven and ill-founded passion.

To the generosity of his nature, it was the purest delight to think that the creature whom he loved should receive everything from his hands, should be lifted up by him, from obscurity and misery, into the fulness of happiness and the serenity of joy; should be led, at a bound, from the barren chambers of poverty, into the splendours of an illustrious and omnipotent rank.

‘My poor, pale, niphétos rose from the north,’ he

thought, with a tender smile, 'you shall flower in full luxuriance, and no wind but the wind of the south shall blow on you; and your children shall blossom around you, and you shall give them all your fair white soul and your valorous heart!'

## IX

HE dined somewhat more quickly than usual that evening, dined alone, and left the table to go out on to the loggia as the golden disc of the moon rose above the dark woods of his gardens. It was still early in the night: deep bells were tolling in all directions around, for it was the vigil of Corpus Domini; young nightingales were trying their tender, slender pipes against the full and sustained melody of their elders' song; and the voices of choristers, chanting in the chapel of his own palace, rose softly and mournfully in the chaunts of the Church.

In the lane below there were quarrelling, cursing, crying; the screams of women, the outcries of viragos, the mewing and miauling of cats. The discordant sounds jarred on the peaceful beauty of the night. He sat down on the marble chair, and waited until they should cease, and leave the place to its own pure fragrance and the notes of the birds. He was

still lost in thought. The discovery of the letter had impressed him greatly ; the knowledge that his father might, by a single kind action, have spared this poor child near him three long years of labour and privation, affected him as though it were some slur on his own conscience, some brutal neglect of his own doing. He was oppressed by the sense that she had been so long close to all the luxury of their daily lives, and had lived in misery which would have been spared her if she had been given one fraction of all that the dishonest household pilfered and purloined every day. It made him feel guilty and ashamed : so near him all this while, and denied the bread that the swans on the garden-water ate, the money that one tropical plant in the hothouses cost to rear ! His heart went out to her with an infinite tenderness : he had so much, and she had nothing.

Hour on hour went on ; the fragrance grew deeper as the night lengthened ; the noises of the lane grew less and less ; the singing of the nightingales rippled like flowing water through the dark. He had no light in the loggia ; he had extinguished even the lamp which hung from the roof ; he had hoped thus to tempt her, perchance, to open her window, in the belief that there was no one there to



see her. But, to his own disappointment, and Ruffino's great vexation, there was nothing to be seen of the tenant of the corner house. The shutters were closed, and neither moon-ray nor sunbeam could enter into the rooms behind. He alternately paced up and down the loggia, and sat at watch in the marble chair, but all was useless. No sign nor sound rewarded his long patience.

Ruffino, peering through the ivy, could see the yellow cat, and other of his enemies, but his master could see nothing of the young Vera.

'It is absurd, intolerable, odious,' thought Castiglione, all his anger against her brother increasing tenfold and twentyfold. Had he been less personally interested and vexed, he would have admitted that it was natural and honourable in the sick Russian to withdraw his sister from the observations and attentions of a man of rank, from the dangerous admiration of a too-illustrious neighbour. But he was too keenly intent on his pursuit of her, too sincerely conscious of the purity and generosity of his own intentions, to be capable of exercising philosophic judgment. The young man seemed to him to be a monster of brutality and egotism, and he bitterly blamed the vile suspicions which could see in himself a Lothario and a Lovelace.

He was only sensible of his own insufferable disappointment as the hours passed away, and the wooden shutters remained closed against all the brilliancy and fragrance of the summer night.

‘Where is your friend, Ruffino?’ he said, wistfully, to the little dog; and Ruffino cocked his head on one side, and looked wise, yet puzzled. He knew that some question was asked of him to which he could not reply.

Castiglione only left the loggia as the dawn broke, its clear, white light rising above the crowded domes and towers and roofs of Rome. With the morning she must open the house, he thought; they must be stifled in it as it was. But when the morning came, and even the noonday, the shutters were still closed on the upper windows.

Below, the door stood open, and the old woman was seated at it, surrounded with her vegetables, and her brooms, and her sacks of dusty, half-charred charcoal; but at the upper windows there was still no sight nor sound of life. A chill and nameless dread came over him. Was it possible that this Nihilist fanatic had persuaded or compelled his young sister to die with him, and by him, in their proud and hopeless wretchedness? He knew that men of that character and opinions set

little store upon life, and often regard suicide as an heroic end to all sentient woes. His apprehension mastered him : who knew what dread secret might lie hidden behind those worm-eaten, unpainted, wooden bars ?

The girl's devotion to her brother had seemed so largely infused with fear and obedience, that she might very possibly have surrendered herself, in despair, to his will, even in this dread sacrifice.

The full, broad brightness of a midsummer noon-day was streaming on the lane below and on the walls of the wretched house. The yellow cat slept soundly, stretched upon the stones ; the people took their siesta within doors, or under such shade as tilted carts or mounds of rubbish afforded them ; the poor, starved dogs forgot their aching stomachs in blissful dreams, stretched upon the flags ; there were for all those moments of oblivion which soothe the most miserable into momentary peace.

In that midday silence the click of the shutter-hasp sounded sharply. Castiglione, who was standing in the sun-bathed loggia, went eagerly to the balustrade, with an exclamation of delight upon his lips. Alas for his hopes ! It was the horny brown hand of the old hag, Veneranda, which was opening the wooden blind, and it was her frowsy grey head,

with a red rag of a handkerchief wound round it, which peered out from the now open casement.

She had a broom in her other hand, and when she had flung open the other shutter, he saw her begin to sweep, with a fierce, desultory dashing of her broom hither and thither, at wall and floor and ceiling; the little iron bed was turned up as if it had not been slept in; the Venetian mirror and the Eikon were gone; the table on which the photographs and prints had been used to lie was bare.

Castiglione cast his dignity to the winds, and leaned over the balustrade, and called out to her: 'Why are you there? Has anything happened? Are your tenants ill? What is it?'

The old woman dropped her broom, and came to the window.

'The saints above us, Signor Principe! how you frightened me! I thought, of course, it was you who took them away, or I should have come at once and told your servants to apprise you of it. How was I to know? And I thought, though the rooms are paid for, that your most illustrious would let me get another tenant, for I am a lone, half-starved, and miserable creature, and every farthing is sore needed——'

'What has happened?' said Castiglione, breath-

lessly; whilst Ruffino, at the sight of the Sor' Veneranda's grizzled pate, filled the air with volleys of barks, which woke the poor mongrels sleeping on the stones.

The old woman stared hard with her sharp black eyes. Her surprise was genuine and extreme.

'It is not your excellency, then, who has taken them away?'

'Why should I take them away?' said Castiglione, angrily. 'I had no interest in them, except pity. What has happened? Where are they gone? Speak plainly, and I will pay you well.'

Veneranda Pilotti had a vivid remembrance of the two new gold-pieces which had passed from his hand to hers a few days earlier. She tried to speak as clearly as she could. In the dusk of the previous evening her tenants had gone out of the house; a facchino had carried the sick man down to a cart, and the girl had got in the same cart, and they had been driven away; it was a common cart, with a mule in it. They had taken their clothes with them, and the old picture, which she supposed was their god; nothing else. They had said nothing to her, and she had said nothing to them, supposing that the Signor Principe, having befriended them before, was assisting them again.



She did not say, what was the fact, that the fine red wine, of which she had bought a barrel with one of the Napoleons, had been so much too strong for her that she had been lying drunk in her back room, upon a heap of empty charcoal-sacks, at the time of their departure, and so had only learned the details of it by hearsay from her neighbours when she had found the rooms vacated early that morning. She had had no doubt in her own mind that their illustrious neighbour had removed them, a cart being used in lieu of a carriage merely for the sake of attracting less notice in the lane. The experience of Sor' Veneranda had not been of a nature to acquaint her with generous or disinterested sentiments, and the interest taken by her princely neighbour in a poor girl who sewed linen and coloured prints for a livelihood could, in her estimation, have but one motive and conclusion.

'I hope your excellency,' she whined, as she leaned from the window-ledge, waving her bony hands in eloquent protestation, 'will believe me that I was like a mother to that sweet young soul. I loved her like my own daughter, and many's the good turn I have done for her in secret; for she was so proud that one had to creep like a mouse and hide like a mole to put the least bit of bread in her mouth. The day

your most illustrious told me that I spoke too quick to her, I was crossed in the grain because she was so proud-stomached and masterful, and shut-up in her misery. But, Lord! your excellency, they were only words; I was good as mother's milk to her. My temper may be hot like a peppered *risotto*, but my heart is good as gold and true as steel. I was only now dusting out her room, because, if I may let it, though it is paid for by your most noble lordship, the gain will be great to me; and if the dear maiden is gone to a finer home and a better fate, I will thank the Holy Virgin on my knees every night, for a sweeter creature never breathed than she is, and looking a princess born.'

'Hold your peace!' said Castiglione, sternly. 'I have nothing to do with her flight, and if you dare to say that I have, it will be the worse for you. Do what you choose with your rooms, but do not dare to take her name in vain, or you will answer to me.'

Then he turned away from the balustrade, and went within to his own house; whilst Veneranda Pilotti wagged her unkempt head over her broomstick.

'He, he, he! Ho, ho, ho!' she chuckled. 'A fine way my Lord Prince is in because I guessed

his pranks! What is the use of all those lies? Haven't I seen his flowers, and his letters, and his star-gazing all these weeks since he first espied the girl sitting here at this lattice? Nor do I know why he should be so afraid of having it known. The old man is dead, and this young lord has got no wife.'

She vexed herself over the problem all the while that she swept and garnished and banged about her rooms; but she could make nothing out of it: a poor girl was a poor girl; she could not see why the new Prince should be mightily ashamed of taking one for sport, as a child plucks a cherry.

'But, holy angels! she's been in luck!' she said to herself twenty times that day; 'a poor, puny thing, with no colour, and red hair!'

If he had taken Poppea, now, the daughter of Pompeo, the scavenger, a fine, black-browed, full-breasted goddess, who danced the tarantella in a manner wondrous to behold, then indeed she could have understood this great lord's condescension to what was so far beneath him.

Castiglione went indoors with one dread lightened, but another substituted for it. Into what depths of misery might not her mad and heartless brother have hurried this poor child? Without

money, without help, without friends, what could become of her, with a paralysed invalid on her hands, and deprived of such shelter and support as she had derived from a little home familiar to her? He divined that Volodia Nelaguine had been the cause and mover of this sudden disappearance, and that the obstinacy and rashness of his character had made him force his sister into an act which multiplied her difficulties, and drove her out into wholly unknown conditions of life. Three years, at her age, seem long, and three years' residence in the little corner house had endeared its poor shelter to her: the gardens had been, as she had said, her consolation, her calendar, her one undying pleasure. Into what darkness, what foulness, what danger, what horrible contact, might she now be thrust by her brother's despotic folly?

Castiglione lost not a moment in seeking out the Russian doctor; but Basilewsky's distress and amaze and anxiety were so genuine on hearing of their disappearance, that the greatest sceptic could not have doubted his absolute ignorance.

'I am shocked, and I am grieved. I did not foresee such a possibility,' he said, when he recovered his calmness. 'Nelaguine has taken his sister away from you; there is no doubt of that; his

body was helpless, but his will was iron, and his authority over her was great. He must have had some trifle of money hidden, which he employed for this purpose ; probably some small sum saved to pay for his burial. With those coins he must have paid the man who carried and the cart which transported him, and the new hole in which he has gone to earth. You would not listen to me, Signor Principe. I told you that he was a youth of savage honour, of unalterable obstinacy ; to such a man, what must your attentions and letters to his sister have seemed ? Only an insult to be avoided at any cost, even at that of death for both herself and him.'

'He is a madman !' said Castiglione, as his forehead grew red under the just reproach and inference of the speaker.

'He is not wholly sane,' said Basilewsky. 'No man is who lies on his back, helpless, torn to pieces by remorse and regret, and seeing no more of the living world around him than if he were lying dead in a church-vault. You must be just. He saw only one way to save his sister from what he considered to be impending dishonour. He has taken that way.'

'I will find her, if I spend every day of my life and every thought of my brain,' he said impetuously, forgetful of the presence of a stranger.



‘And if you succeed, my lord,’ said Basilewsky, ‘her brother will only take her away again, only bury her five fathoms deeper. A youth who braved the Tzar of all the Russias fears no ills, physical or mental; when anyone, of his own deliberate choice, risks Siberia or the scaffold, nothing afterwards can have terrors for him. If it be necessary, Volodia Nelaguine will fire his revolver into his sister’s bosom sooner than see her in any danger from your admiration. I speak bluntly. You will pardon me; I am no courtier, and it hurts me to think that this child should be hidden like this, even from me. I am her only friend.’

‘Not her only one,’ said Castiglione, with repressed emotion.

‘You cannot be her friend,’ said the old man, harshly. ‘That her brother knew; and for once, fool though he be, he is right.’

‘Are you so sure?’ said Castiglione, dreamily. ‘Well, let us find her first; then we will see.’

‘If I can find her, I shall not tell you of it, my lord,’ said the old man, curtly.

‘You will be wrong,’ said the younger man, with sadness; for why, he thought, must everyone think that he had neither pity nor chivalry in him?

‘We will find her ourselves, Ruffino,’ he said to

his little dog; and Ruffino put his head on one side, and assumed his most sedate and sympathetic expression.

He did not know what troubled his master; he supposed that it was the yellow cat.

Ruffino was very human in his mental vision; his own enmities and amities were to him the measure of the world's. He could imagine no one being altogether at peace so long as the yellow cat crawled in freedom over the tiles, and cleaned its fur unmolested in the sunshine. The whole universe was out of joint whilst such a wrong endured.

'I will find her,' Castiglione said to himself, passionately, 'if I spend on it every day of my life and every thought of my mind.'

And, at first sight, to discover her retreat seemed easy enough to a man who knew the city in which she was so well, and commanded such resources of wealth and service as he did. But the time slipped away, and to find her did not prove to be so easy. He could not bring himself to employ the police in the search; he could not bear to give her over to such vulgar surveillance, and he was not sure what harm it might not do to her companion. He endeavoured to conduct the investigations himself, employing only such men in his own service as he could entirely trust.

But their efforts were in vain, and he began in despair to believe that, miraculous as such an escape would seem, they must have got by some means to Civita Vecchia, and thence by some sea-route to another land. Yet their extreme poverty, and the physical helplessness of Nelaguine, forbade this explanation to be seriously entertained. The alternate conclusion, that they were hidden somewhere in the city, was more probable. Rome was large, and had many obscure portions, which strangers could remain in, untroubled by inquiries municipal or fiscal. It was likely enough that they were close by, in some one of the narrow passages of the Trastevere, where the population burrowed like rabbits. He made every investigation that was possible, but of the man and mule who had carried them away there was no trace to be found. No one in the lane had taken any notice of so common an event as a common cart stopping at a door in the dusk. Unassisted, however, no invalid would have been able to arrange so rapid and secret a change of habitation; and Castiglione felt sure that the young girl herself had been no willing agent in the abandonment of her little home, and of the neighbourhood of those gardens which were so dear to her: he was sure that she had been the

victim now, as she had been in the flight from Russia.

But all his suspicions, all his anxieties, were useless; no one could tell him anything, and he himself walked the streets of Rome, in all its poorest quarters, without success.

Again and again he implored, menaced, commanded, entreated Basilewsky to reveal the truth; but the old man declared that he knew no more than the dead: and the visible trouble in which he was plunged by the loss of his country-people confirmed the truth of his declaration. Had he known where his young favourites were, and merely concealed it from a sense of duty, he would not have been, as he evidently was, distressed at the want of confidence which they had shown in him, and the mystery which surrounded their disappearance.

But Castiglione had a patrician's scepticism as to the good faith of revolutionists; and Basilewsky was, by his own admission, a Nihilist, who had been driven out of his own country by the doctrines which he followed and professed. He caused the old doctor to be followed day and night for a week; but nothing was learned or gained by it, except the proof that his charity to the poorest of the population was inexhaustible, and that a love of botany took him

often out on to the Campagna, and to the meadows and woods of the various villas. He was a lonely man, and lived hardly, and tramped about with a stout stick as his only aid, and a tin case for his botanical specimens slung across his back.

It was quite certain that he could hold no communication with the fugitives, for the record of his days, to every minute, was brought to Castiglione by those whom he employed to watch the movements of this harmless anarchist.

The great heats of the full summer had now come, and he was unused to, and oppressed by, them; for so many years he had passed every summer month in green pleasure-places of Germany or France, in English country-houses, or on cool, northern seas, in his steam-yacht. The vast accumulation of affairs consequent on the death of his father gave him excuse enough to remain in Rome; but he was conscious that his people wondered at his long delay in leaving the city, and Saverio, his old body-servant, ventured several times to suggest that the mountain air of the great Montefeltro castle, on the slopes of the snow-crowned Leonessa, would be better for his master's health than these close heats of Trastevere.

‘The Holy Father is shut up in Trastevere,’



replied Castiglione, curtly, with a motion of his hand towards the pile of the Vatican; and the opinion gained ground amongst his household that he was going to alter his ways and views, and become a devotee, as the late Prince had been. But Saverio shook his head when he heard them say this.

‘It is not priests he is thinking of; it is a woman,’ said Saverio to himself. Nothing but a woman would have kept his lord here, in the melancholy and silent magnificence of his Roman palace, when the canicular heats were burning brown the lawns of his gardens, and making the carp in his fishponds lie faint and gasping amongst the yellowed leaves of the water-lilies.

Saverio saw, as Ruffino saw, that his master was distressed and angered. These long wanderings on foot through the worst portions of the city fatigued and depressed him. By them he became acquainted with the haunts of misery and crime; he saw hunger and nakedness in their worst forms; he understood want, as it existed side by side with luxury and power.

Whilst tender-hearted, and by temper generous, he had led the careless and selfish life of a man of pleasure: he had given liberally, but he had thought little of where his gifts went, and of why they were

wanted ; he had been often imposed upon, and he had been content with the surface of things. But in these weeks in which he searched for Vera Nelaguine, his eyes were opened, and his mind was filled with the true meanings of the misery which lay without his gates, grovelling in the filth of rags and in the horrors of disease.

To think that this gentle child, whose labours he had watched so long, was lost to him amidst these unutterable desolations of the city, cut him to the quick ; to know that she must be in one of these dens where the poor were crowded during the torrid heat, the noisome fever-mists, the sights and scents and sounds of some squalid alley, or some foul nest made between the broken columns of what once had been a temple or a palace, was to him an almost unendurable torture. The scorching cloudless days, the heavy, dewless nights, were trying enough to him in his vast and noble house, with its cool, marble courts, its wide, long corridors, its shadowy, fragrant gardens, and its superb halls and chambers, which were so lofty that the eye gazing upwards saw the angels and the gods of their frescoed domes lost as in a vision, Ezekiel-like, of the heavens opened.

If even here and thus the canicular weeks were hard to bear, what, he thought, must they be where

she was ; doubtless in some festering, filthy, crowded passage, where the blackened walls shut out the sky, and the air was made hideous by screams and oaths and blows and children's shrieks !

To think of her thus was an almost insupportable pain to him, into which self-reproach entered. If he had not approached her, she would at least have remained in this little house which was familiar to her, with the verdure of his own gardens and the ripple of his own fountain-waters near at hand to give her at least some sound and solace of the summer.

‘ She did us good, Ruffino, and we have done her nothing but ill,’ he said to the little dog as he paced the loggia one evening. Ruffino shook his head, making his new silver bells ring where they were hidden under his ruff.

Life was dull to him in Rome. At this season he was always trotting on the green edges of some promenade at Spa, or Homburg, or Karlsbad, or Vichy, flirting with Elsa or some other canine fair at Baden, or scratching up the sea-sand on the shore of Schweningen or Blankenberghe, or some other marine resort where the white-and-gold sides of his master's yacht shone in the sunshine amongst similar pleasure-craft. Rome made Ruffino hot and cross. Fleas were

many ; flies were legion ; and the very marble itself grew warm where the sun-rays baked it all day long.

Besides, the supreme interest of watching for his enemy, Magliabecchi, was now a thing of the past ; Magliabecchi and Don Antonio had alike faded out from the range of his vision, and the vigil over the yellow cat was only a source of exasperating and hopeless irritation ; for, to prevent any possibility of his ever again descending after her into her lane, his master had caused the balustrade to be fenced in with copper netting, and Ruffino could only get the tip of his nose between those closely-woven wires ; and it seemed to him that the yellow cat, safe in her shamelessness, looked up at him, and grinned at him in derision from below.

On the whole Rome was dull to him, and there was no amusement for him except to eat ; and in that amusement he indulged liberally and unchecked.

But Ruffino, eating the *foie gras* and scorning the aspic, picking out the truffles and leaving the salmi, was occasionally visited by the Nemesis of all gourmets, and did not digest as well as the poor mongrels below, who had stomachs which could cope with bits of wood and bones swallowed entire. Besides his dyspepsia, Ruffino was often pained by his ignorance of, and exclusion from, the movements of the man he



loved. To have a plate of good things set before him, and be bidden to lie still in the loggia or in the library whilst his master went out on unknown errands, was a vexation to his devoted and enterprising spirit.

Castiglione did not take him into all these dangerous and poverty-haunted portions of the city, because he was afraid that harm might come to the small dog owing to his audacious temper and insatiate curiosity ; but Ruffino could not tell his motive, and was only vexed and wounded at being left behind. The valorous exposer of Magliabecchi should, he felt, not be deemed unworthy to accompany his lord anywhere. When his lord said to him, ‘ Stay at home, little one,’ he obeyed, because he could not do otherwise, but he felt that he was outraged and ill-treated. That yellow cat was allowed full freedom ; and he, Ruffino, her superior in every way in the scale of creation, was treated like a baby, and shut up on the loggia or in the library, with a china bowl of iced milk and a plate of chopped liver, there to yawn away the long, empty hours as best he could. He could hardly bring himself to be sympathetic when his master returned, as he inevitably did, from his solitary excursions, jaded, fatigued, and evidently disappointed.

‘ Where can she be, Ruffino ? ’ said Castiglione, often, with a tired sigh ; and Ruffino, although he could



not understand the words, knew very well that his lord was worried and depressed about something.

It was not Magliabecchi now ; therefore it must be the abominable yellow cat. Ruffino wrinkled his brows, and pondered anxiously : he did not see how he could ever help his master if he were left behind in the palace, and for all excursions confined to the lawns and alleys of the gardens below.

He observed that his master never now sat on the marble chair by the balustrade, and whenever he did pace up and down the loggia, looked now and again out at the evening skies with an impatient sigh.

‘There is something wrong,’ thought Ruffino. ‘But what ?’

He, with all his wisdom, could not guess why his dear friend never now opened a book, and had no heart to watch the constellations loom large, as night waned, above the ilex woods.

‘And we see no ladies ever now,’ he thought. Ruffino hated ladies ; but they amused him because they were always so terribly afraid of him, and yet complimented and caressed him (or would have caressed him) so flatteringly, to please his owner. Nothing had ever better diverted him than to show his little, pearl-like teeth at them and make them scream.

Things must be in a strange way, he thought, when there were none of those living packets of lace, and pearl-powder, and jewels, and blonde curls, anywhere about the steps of his master.

He remembered, when he was a puppy, pulling one of the blonde curls once off one of them ; and how the lady had blushed and fidgeted ; and how everybody else near them had tittered ; and how his master, convulsed with laughter, had called him 'enfant terrible à quatre pattes,' which had seemed to Ruffino approbation.

But such merry days were now no more ; and no ladies ever crossed the threshold of the Montefeltro palace, except an austere Mother Superior of an aristocratic Order, who was Castiglione's aunt and god-mother, and who, under dispensation, called solemnly on him once to propose an alliance to him with a cousin, which he ungratefully declined.

## X

'WHERE is she, Ruffino ?' said Castiglione, restlessly, seeing through the open windows of the little corner house some frowsy women, in gaudy-coloured petticoats, who were hanging out strings of sliced tomatoes in the sun to dry. He repented him that he had

not forbidden the old Veneranda to let the rooms. It seemed odious profanity to see those beldames there in the little chamber where he had thrown his gloxinias, and where Vera had slept her innocent sleep, and prayed to her familiar Eikon. It was a humble common place, but it had been spiritualised and poetised by the presence of a pure and heroic youth.

He was incensed against himself that he should not have prevented such a sacrilege: it seemed to accentuate and confirm more hopelessly the entire loss of her, when he saw those hags leaning out of her casement, and heard them chattering in guttural voices, as they hung out their tomatoes.

‘I wish to buy that lane; I give you full powers,’ he said that day to his steward. ‘Yes, of course the price will be utterly out of proportion to its value; that one must expect: but it is an eyesore, an unutterable and intolerable nuisance. I desire to annex it to the palace, and throw it into the gardens. Deal with the owners as best you can, but purchase the whole place; the old woman owning the corner house will drive a hard bargain, but to clear it all away I shall not grudge the price.’

‘It shall be done before the week is out, most illustrious,’ said the steward.

But he had reckoned without Veneranda Pilotti.

The first hint which she received that her illustrious neighbour wished to buy her premises sufficed to make her hold to them tooth and nail.

His agents seduced, cajoled, tempted, dazzled, finally threatened her—all to no avail.

‘ Oh ! he wants my poor house, does he ? ’ she said to all of them. ‘ Well, he will not have it, then. No, not if he filled it chuck full of gold-pieces from cellar to rafter. There is law in the city,’ she added, as the miller of Sans Souci said to Frederick the Great, ‘ and we will see if a young noble can despoil a poor lone widow. Pay ? Why, yes, he would pay ; I hear that well enough, but I do not choose to sell ; go tell him so. He wants it to please his puny, pale-faced *dama* ; and he shall not have it ; it is mine—mine—mine as much as the Vatican yonder is our Holy Father’s. I will not sell—no ! no ! no ! no ! Go, tell him so ! ’

She fully intended to sell, but after the manner of her nation she walked backwards to spring farther and spring higher.

She had bemoaned herself a hundred times a week that the house ruined her, wretched little hole as it was, and yet taxed as if it were a palace ; she had longed to sell it, tried to sell it, over and over again, meaning if she could do so to go and live in the place of her birth, a village under Castel Gandolfo.

But the power of refusing her great neighbour anything was sweet to her, and as her shrewdness divined the tender emotion which moved him to take it out of her hands, she said to herself that she would make him go on his knees to her before he got it, and pay for every brick of it its weight in gold.

That their lord could spend his summer in the Trastevere, and vex his soul over the purchase of the lane, stupefied his household. Even his father, who had loathed change of any kind, had never remained later than June in Rome, and had always gone at the end of that month to the castle on the Leonessa, or to his marine palace by Palo.

‘I must go away,’ said Castiglione every night to himself, as the fever-breeding mists stole up like smoke from the baked, cracked earth, and the myriads of gnats and mosquitoes circled round every lamp which hung from the palace-walls or burned in the old bronze sconces.

But when the morning came he said, invariably, ‘I will stay one more day. Perhaps I shall hear of her to-day.’

Invitations of all kinds lay in piles on his table : women whose wishes had always had magic over him wrote in vain, and in vain beguiled and besought him to join them by northern waters, under western



woods, or in voyages of pleasure and pastime. He took no notice of all their proposals and entreaties. The death of the Prince of Montefeltro was known all over Europe; he let all the world suppose that he was absorbed in grief or overwhelmed in affairs. The printed letter of the *faire part* addressed to them by his secretary was all that his most intimate friends received.

He had no memory for any one of them: all he saw was a Cenci-like face, with brown, soft, dove-like eyes, and a thin, small, white hand, for ever working—working—working. He could not bring himself to leave the city while she was still unfound. She could hardly fail to be in great wretchedness, unless she had discovered some new friends, of whom he knew nothing; and this did not seem to him likely. Her brother might have dragged her down into still lower deeps of poverty and sickness; her own health might have given way under the severe strain which she put on it: there was no end to the various shapes of misery in which his imagination pictured her. He could not sleep for thinking of all which might have befallen, which might still befall her; and Ruffino, who liked to enjoy a good night's rest undisturbed, justly deeming the daylight long enough for toil and trouble, was much annoyed by the manner in which

his master got up and walked restlessly about in the hot and windless hours which immediately preceded dawn.

A sense of duty made Ruffino sit bolt upright all the time, on the watch lest there should be any rat or cat from which his friend required to be delivered; but he yawned frequently, and felt that an owner troubled with insomnia was a severe trial to the loyalty of a dog. To occupy himself, and keep himself awake, he made drowsy dashes at the tapestries, behind which he could hear mice rustling stealthily; but it was fruitless work, and Ruffino preferred sound, uneventful sleep to a campaign against rodents who defied him in their secure intrenchment behind the historic draperies designed by John of Flanders.

One morning, Castiglione, who rose little refreshed from his bed, went down after his bath, in the early morning air, into the gardens. It was that season of great heat in which the daybreak even is not cool, and the sultry night sinks languidly into the oppressive fever of the dawn.

‘Decidedly I must go away,’ he thought, ‘or I shall lose my mind and my health in this solitude.’

Yet he could not endure the thought of leaving Rome in continued ignorance of her fate; it seemed to him incredible that all the resources of money and

of intelligence should be of no avail to trace her steps. His dread lest death should have sealed the mystery of her fate returned, and increased upon him. The poor and forlorn die unnoticed, unnamed, unmourned, even as they live. She might, very possibly, have passed from the obscurity of poverty and exile into the eternal exile of the tomb, without any human being having mourned for her. He shuddered as he thought of her delicate beauty hustled by rough hands into the deal shell of a pauper's coffin, and thrown into the common pit where the poor are left to rot together. If it were so, he said to himself, bitterly her maniac of a brother would have murdered her as surely as though he had shot her dead as Basilewsky had imagined.

‘And that is fraternal affection! that is family honour!’ thought Castiglione, passionately, as he paced the long aisles of clipped arbutus and bay which closed in fragrant darkness above his head. Ruffino paced thoughtfully beside him, thinking a little of Thuringian Elsa, but more of the minced chicken which would be ready for him when he should go indoors.

Suddenly he stopped, growled, and sniffed the air; the scent of something wicked was borne on it to his sensitive olfactory nerves; then he ran forward,

and pounced upon a square white envelope lying on the grass, and would have torn it into a hundred pieces with his teeth and claws had not his companion taken it from him.

‘Stop, Ruffino!’ said Castiglione, as he rescued it; ‘it may be from her.’

Ruffino let it go reluctantly; it had a wicked smell.

Castiglione tore it open in haste; its cover was inscribed to ‘The Most Noble the Prince of Montefeltro, Duke of Castiglione and Marquis of Vivalda.’

On a broad sheet of paper were written a few lines :

*‘The Russian maiden for whom you care so much is in ill-health; her brother is dead, and she will soon follow him. This is for your information, from one who is your friend. Cease to search for her, for you will never find her; you will not even find her grave.’*

The brutal words were as the echo of his direst fears, his dreadest forebodings. He stood still, like one stunned, whilst the deep black shadows of the arbutus and bay fell across his path.

This letter from a friend! It must have come from his bitterest enemy, he thought. Ruffino had been right in scenting the hand of a foe.

It must have come, also, from some one con-

versant with the gardens, and acquainted with his preference for this alley above all other parts of the many avenues and green walks.

‘ Oh ! Ruffino, you are wiser than I,’ he said, with a heavy sigh.

Ruffino coughed politely ; it was his way of deprecating a compliment, yet allowing its accuracy. He knew from whom the letter came. He could smell in it the fingers of Magliabecchi. But, alas ! he could not say so in any language which should be intelligible to the blunt and finite senses of man.

Castiglione walked to and fro the grassy path with agitated, aimless haste, affrighting the nightingales amongst the bay thickets, and startling the blackbirds from their breakfast on the arbutus-fruit. He did not doubt the truth of what the letter said, for it accorded too well with his own fears, and it bore the stamp of a brutal and malignant veracity.

From whom could it come ? If her brother were dead, who could have any interest in separating her from him ? Her very existence was known to hardly any one out of all the population of Rome. Basilewsky, indeed, might have found her : but no ; Basilewsky had always shown himself a kind and honest man ; he would be incapable of this act of devilish malignity.



Then, remembering the little dog's fury at the sight and scent of the letter, and the knowledge of his own daily habits which its place in that especial walk betokened, his slower human sense arrived at the same suspicion which Ruffino's quick canine instincts had reached at once.

'It is from Magliabecchi,' he said aloud; and Ruffino, hearing the detested name, stopped in his walk, and lifted up an eloquent little face with black lips upcurled over two rows of small, sharp teeth.

'Ah! you knew it, Ruffo?' said Castiglione. 'Great heavens! if she be in that fiend's power!'

All his possessions, all his riches, all his position seemed vain and useless things; he felt as helpless as an animal caught in the jaws of a trap.

The letter was not in the handwriting of either Magliabecchi or of Don Antonio, but he had no doubt that it was a revenge of one or both of them; a return for the clemency with which he had let them depart unmolested and unpunished. He hurried to the house, and bade his people inquire what and where had been the actions and residence of the physician and the chaplain since their dismissal on the day of his father's death. They were both well-known men; they had been forty years in his father's service; it

would be easy, he thought, to find them, even if they were in hiding.

Of Don Antonio he soon received tidings ; he was in retreat with a religious fraternity outside the walls : of Magliabecchi, everyone declared, truly or falsely, that they knew nothing ; only one of the gardeners testified to having seen some one who had looked like him under the south wall of the lower garden on the previous evening. No doubt, Castiglione thought, he had laid the letter there himself for greater security, and it was the scent of his touch upon it which Ruffino had recognised with so much rage.

He communicated with the municipal police, although he had no confidence in them, and gave them the errand of finding Magliabecchi ; of her he could not bring himself to speak to the Questura. The news given him might be the mere malicious inventions of a revengeful and false rogue ; but he could not be sure of that, and they agreed too completely with his own presentiments to be doubted or rejected.

Magliabecchi had probably been the cause of her disappearance, perhaps by some information or suggestion given to her brother, whose suspicions had been so easy to arouse ; and the youth had probably died of the excitement and exertion of the

removal, perishing in some nameless hole in the city, like a wounded fox in its secret earth.

Never before had Castiglione been so conscious of the impotency of rank and wealth. He would have given all that he had just inherited to trace and save one fragile, fleeting life; and he was as helpless as if he had been any penniless labourer working on the mud banks of the Tiber, with the woman whom he loved left behind him to perish of ague in a rush-hut on the Agro Romana.

‘Rank is an irony sometimes, Ruffino,’ he said to his only confidant, who did not entirely understand, but knew that something was wrong, and felt that if the wire had not been put up to separate him from the yellow cat, this wrong would probably have been set right long ago. He never doubted that the cat was at the bottom of everything, and that Magliabecchi had originally created her.

Castiglione read and re-read the cruel lines which had, as it were, plunged a knife into his breast. He could not doubt the truth of them, passionately as he longed to do so. He showed them to Basilewsky, and once again, before the genuine distress of the old man, was forced to believe that he was as ignorant as he declared.

‘See into what your refusal to press my friendship

on her brother has led herself and him !' he said, in bitter anger and reproach.

Basilewsky bent his grey head in meekness under the rebuke.

'I acted according to my light ; I did what I considered my duty,' he said, gently. 'Besides, it is quite certain, my lord, that nothing which I could have said or done would have altered this poor youth's views of your desire to befriend him. I have little hope that this letter you show me is untrue. It is only too likely that the effort of his removal has resulted in his death, and that the strain so long put before her strength has broken it down. She has been his victim from first to last. He had no right to drag her down to share his self-sought miseries. She was a delicately-nurtured, aristocratic child, a hot-house flower ; and he brought her where she had to work like a common drudge, and hardly earn every bit and drop which passed her lips and his. He felt intense remorse ; but that was of no use. The evil was done when he dragged her after him away from her home and her friends. No ; I do not know anything of her. I give you my word that I do not. But I agree with you, it is only too probable that all which this letter says is true.'

‘Ill-news is always true,’ said Castiglione, bitterly.  
‘It is only our joys which deceive us.’

Basilewsky looked at him earnestly.

‘You are not well, my lord, yourself,’ he said ;  
‘you should leave Rome. You have set your soul upon this thing because it eludes you. But you would do better to put it out of your mind altogether. You are young, you are powerful, you are exceptionally favoured by Nature and by fortune. Put this unhappy child out of your thoughts, and seek your pleasures and affections in your own world. Even if Volodia Nelaguine be in his grave, she will not disobey him if she has promised him to flee from you.’

‘I will find her, and we shall see,’ said Castiglione, obstinately. ‘I will not leave Rome until I find her—living or dead.’

‘You will waste your own life uselessly,’ said the elder man.

‘And has not hers been wasted?’ said Castiglione. All his accustomed luxuries, all his pleasant habits, all his ephemeral passions, all his physical indulgences, seemed to him like a crime against her.

‘Whilst I was dining or playing *écarté*, those brutes were bearing her off out of my reach,’ he thought, with a heavy sense as of some sin against her.

He felt that he should have been more vigilant,



quicker ; more resolute to take her from her brother's domination, more swift and eager to assure her of his own tenderness and protection. His father's death, his engrossing affairs, his own hesitation, his vacillation between belief in her and doubt of her, had let slip time which now he would have given half his possessions to recall.

It seemed to him as if he had been so miserably lacking in decision, in energy, in faith, that the burden of her loss lay at his own doors.

He regretted, with a despairing knowledge of how useless all regret was, that he had not disregarded her entreaties, and forcibly made his way into the presence of her brother.

He put the search for her in the hands of one of his men-of-business. It was odiously repugnant to him to speak of her ; but he dared waste no more time, or leave untried any chance or possibility which might lead to her discovery. Magliabecchi had easily been traced ; but he was living, quietly, on a third floor in the street of the Quattro Fontane, and there was nothing in his daily habits and occupations to connect him in any way either with the composition of the letter or the disappearance of the fugitives.

The certainty existing in Castiglione's own mind admitted of no proof. He had the rogue watched

carefully, day after day, but nothing was recorded, except wholly uninteresting details of such sober amusements and blameless occupations as became a man of his mature years and respectable calling. He had laid by enough in his long service in the Montefeltro palace to live at ease, to dabble in some safe speculations on the Bourse, and water his capons and quails with the best and oldest wines, and make his fifteen per cent. snugly in private loans and judicious mortgages.

Of his dismissal from that palace, as it had been followed up by no arrest or criminal proceedings, he made light in all appearance, however fiercely and bitterly his soul chafed at it in secret.

‘I did wrong to let him go unpunished,’ said Castiglione ; ‘but he had served my father so many years, and I counted on some decency of gratitude.’

The lawyers to whom he said this smiled discreetly. Rogues, they knew, no more feel gratitude than they feel remorse. Magliabecchi forgot the clemency ; but he remembered very keenly the loss of the jewels and the ducats, the exposure before servants, and the sharp incisions of Ruffino’s little stiletto-like teeth.

One evening, in the loggia Ruffino saw a nice, brown, tempting-looking piece of fried meat, lying on

the pavement near the balustrade; he was not hungry; he was, indeed, as usual, so completely satisfied, gastronomically, that he had not a grain of appetite left, so that he was indifferent and cautious, and merely sniffed gingerly at the morsel. The scent of it seemed to him unusual and suspicious, and he let it lie where it was; and in the morning the servants going to polish the marble pavement found two garden rats lying stiff and stark and swollen in the place where the fragments of the poisoned cutlet were.

It had been the good physician's parting gift for Ruffino.

But Magliabecchi made no more of such dangerous presents. He aimed at higher vengeance, and to that end led a sober and blameless life quite openly in the sight of all men.

'Little devil!' he said viciously, whenever his thoughts reverted to his victorious four-footed foe, 'you should not live a second were it not that, if I kill you, I may miss something that will hurt your master more.'

For Magliabecchi knew that if Ruffino died a violent death he would be certainly judged to be the dealer of it, and observation and suspicion would be attached to him by that act which might baulk him of the greater blow he so carefully prepared.

## XI

THE days passed on, and neither the espionage on the physician nor the acute investigations of Castiglione's lawyers produced any effect. No traces of the fugitives could be found; it seemed as if death indeed had closed in its eternal mystery over them both.

The Jews who were the owners of the lane had all agreed to sell their rights over it; the price asked was exorbitant, but Castiglione bade his representative accept it, and the Viccolo of St. Anastasia at last became his, with the exception of Veneranda Pilotti's corner house. She still held out, partly from the keenness of over-reaching avarice, partly from the triumph of feeling that she, old, poor, and disreputable as she was, could refuse what he wished to the Prince of Montefeltro in all his power, youth, and plenitude.

She guessed that he hated to hear the jar of drunken voices, the clatter of wine-flasks, the hissing of frying lard, the uproar of quarrelling boys, where the gentle vision of his lost love had been seen in the serenity of the moonlight and the warm flush of sunrise. She guessed that her presence and that of her lodgers irritated and sickened her patrician

neighbour when he paced his marble floor, under the lofty arches of his loggia, behind his screen of tea-rose foliage and thickly-woven noisettes; and the sense of power and malign superiority which it bestowed on her was too sweet to be readily parted with. She had not forgotten the censures which he had passed on her when he had paid her those two gold-pieces for her rent.

‘My fine gentleman! you shall dance like a dancing dog after my pleasure!’ she said, with a glow of coarse delight. ‘You want my house, and you want your *dama*. Well, you shall get neither until you go on your bended knees to me.’

For she had found out where her last tenants had gone, and knew their fate; but it was a secret which she meant to keep, as she meant to keep her house, until she had wrung out of him such a stream of wealth that she should be able to drink lachryma Christi by the pailsful, and stuff her mattress with bundles of bank-notes instead of dry leaves. But being almost constantly more or less drunk, she was confused in her ideas, and did not realise that unless she offered both her secret and her house, her dreams of Paradise could never even be started upon the road to realisation.

‘You’ll stand out till you will lose all,’ said one



of her neighbours, shrewdly. 'Sure it will not be for ever, nor for long, that a great prince like him yonder will fret his soul out of his body wishing for a bit of a cottage and a puny work-girl. You should take him whilst the whim is on him and the cat jumps.'

Startled and terrified by this argument, Sor' Veneranda, after the manner of her class, rushed from one extreme to another; from the heights of wily and triumphant cunning, she fell headlong down into the lowest deeps of agonised trepidation. If she should have outstayed her market? If, in her excessive greed and caution, she should have killed her goose ere it laid any golden eggs at all? The terror of having missed her mark and overshot her arrows fermented hotly in her scheming brain, and produced in her that temerity which is seldom wanting in those who are confused with the fumes of wine.

'Maybe I will sell my house, but I will not sell stick or stone of it unless I see the Prince himself about it,' she said, doggedly, to his agents, who in vain protested to her that he never transacted any business himself, and could not be approached upon the subject. She was dogged and unchangeable.

'I will see his most illustrious himself, or I will

not sell my house,' she repeated; and finding that the agents and stewards and servants were all firm in declaring such a stipulation to be inadmissible, she set herself to watch for his coming out on to the loggia. He was there but little now, for nowhere did he suffer so much from the loss of the pale maiden, who, like a snowdrop from the north, had used to come into his vision with the moonlight and the starlight. But still, sometimes, in the sultry evenings, he strolled there for the sake of coolness when he was tired out from his hot and dusty wanderings in the streets.

One evening she saw him thus, standing behind the smooth green foliage of the rose-trees which formed so thick a screen between the lane and loggia, although the roses themselves bloomed no more.

She leaned as far as she could out of the upper window—the window of Vera—and made a trumpet of her big and bony hands.

'Signor Duca! Signor Principe! I have something to say to you. Will you hear?'

Castiglione, on whose nerves the harsh, coarse voice grated, came to the balustrade, moved by a sudden revival of that hope which every day grew fainter and fainter within him. Perhaps this old wretch knew something.

‘What do you want with me?’ he asked curtly; whilst Ruffino, with his slender nose thrust as far as it would go through the wires, growled his disapproval of her audacity.

It was late at night; the lane was quiet, the moon was full and high in the heavens, and poured its silvery brightness on the bold brown face and the rough grizzled head of the old Roman, as she leaned eagerly from her lattice.

‘Excellency!’ she whined, trying in vain to make her rude voice soft and persuasive: ‘you have always wronged me, excellency, and never believed in my zealous devotion to that sweet creature, who was as dear to me as if she had been my granddaughter. And now I hear you want to buy my house, just by way of remembrance of her; but the price your people offer me, most illustrious, is robbery, sheer robbery! I am a poor lone creature, and wholly at the mercy of a great gentleman like yourself, but sure am I that your generous and benevolent heart would never take any advantage of a widow’s needs——’

‘Name your price to my agents, and they will give it if they think it a proper one,’ said Castiglione, disappointed in his hope, and losing patience. ‘If you have anything more to say to me, say it

quickly, and without roundabout falsehoods. You are a cruel and bad woman. You cannot impose upon me.'

'The saints above us befriend me!' cried the Sor' Veneranda. 'Never was any poor creature so belied and so unjustly blamed. Your excellency will learn one day how you have wronged me. Meantime, my house is my own, and what I know is my own, too. Neither prince nor pontiff can get either house or secret out of me.'

'I am ready to pay for your house, and I am ready to pay for your secret,' said Castiglione, sternly; 'but if you want to sell either one or the other, or to sell both, you would do well not to trifle with me, for I may be in no mood to buy them another night.'

The soul of the old woman quaked within her. It was just as her neighbour had suggested: he might alter his mind and change his fancies, and then '*adieu veau, vache, cochons!*'

She hastened to change her mind before he could change his.

'I have always said I would take a thousand scudi for the house, and it is too much honour for a poor miserable creature like me to have anything which can please your most illustrious

self,' she whined in her most servile and cajoling accents.

'A thousand scudi! It is not worth three hundred. You know that.'

'A thousand scudi; and that is less than the nuns of the Sepolte Vive would have given me for it last year. And it is solely because I know your excellency wants it out of memory of the poor young thing, that I consent to give it up for such a pittance.'

Castiglione shrank from the coarse, rough touch on his tenderest sentiment; it was horrible to him that this old wretch should have guessed, and, thus guessing, be able to spread abroad the reason of his tenacious desire for the purchase of her freehold.

'My father wished for years to purchase the lane, and I do so because it is a nuisance and a scandal,' he replied. 'I shall not treat with you. If you wish to sell your property, acquaint my people. They will settle it.'

'But if I could tell your excellency where the signorina is?' said the old woman, insidiously. 'You would not like me to go to your men-of-business with her name?'

A thrill ran through him as he heard. He



realised how completely a noble, delicate, and lofty feeling can at times place those in whose breast it dwells at the mercy of coarse brutality and avaricious cunning.

He was silent; and the old woman whispered, as gently as her hoarse voice could do so:

‘If I tell your most illustrious what I know, will you order your people to give me a thousand scudi for this house?’

‘If you tell me what I find true, I will. The price is absurd, enormous; but if you tell me the truth you shall receive it.’

‘And a hundred crowns for myself, for good will?’

‘No; not a farthing more. Speak, or keep silent, as you choose.’

She perceived that it was his last word; she was sharp and shrewd when the wine-fumes were not in her head, and she saw that she must limit her aspirations or lose all.

‘Well, well,’ she said, piteously, ‘it is a great honour that your most illustrious should hearken in person to such as I; far be it from me to haggle and huckster with a great prince, who surely will never let a poor old creature lose by doing him a service. This is what I know, your excellency, though, as

these heavens are above us, I only learned it yesternight. It was the leech who served the most high, your father, and who was put out of the house by you with contumely, who got those poor young folk away.'

Castiglione was silent.

He knew that it was very possible that from the first she had known both the cause of their departure and whither they had gone: the baser and coarser she was, the more likely was it that she had purposely concealed her knowledge to traffic in it thus. It might be only a lie to raise the price of her tenement; but, again, it might be the truth. For even such creatures as she can tell the truth when they are likely to gain money by it.

'If you indeed know anything,' he said, cutting short her repeated flatteries and asseverations, 'say it, and say it as it is. You are already likely to be in trouble with the police for not having given due notice of your tenants' change of place, and you will best consult your own interests in being honest—if you can be so.'

Veneranda Pilotti leaned farther out of the window, the whole of her brown, fierce, wrinkled face working eagerly with avarice and fear and longing, the brass earrings she wore glittering in the bright moonlight,

and riveting the stern, inquisitive gaze of Ruffino's black eyes.

'Great gentlemen like you, your excellency, always forget that there may be venom in the worm which you tread under heel : the puff-adder looks like a dry, dead stick in the dust, but there is life in it—and there is death in it. The leech—his name I cannot remember—got in here, pretending to the girl—to the signorina—that you had sent him, and that he had a marvellous cure, with which he could raise her brother from his bed and make a man of him. She, being beguiled by your name and her own hopes, let him in ; and he got to the sick youth's side, and then shut the door on her ; and when she was safely got rid of began to write things to her brother on the slate which she always used, for you know the lad was stone-deaf. Myself, I listened, and looked through a chink in the wall—a chink I made on purpose twenty years ago, for it is always well to see what one's lodgers do. The leech only wrote on the slate, and I cannot tell what he wrote ; but I guessed it was about you and the girl—the signorina—for the young man, he raved against you like a madman, and I heard him say that he would sooner shoot his sister dead than you ever again set eyes upon her. And then I know no more what they agreed on, for the

youngster whispered, and the leech wrote on the slate. But in the dusk that night the cart took them away, and yesternight, by mere chance, I learned that they went across the water to that passage-way, called after Papa Bonifazio, which joins the Ghetto; and I learned that the young man died there of chills taken in his removal, and that the girl—the signorina—had fallen ill of grief, and perhaps of hunger, too, and had been sent to some poor hospital, and whether now living or dead no one in that quarter could say. I suppose the leech took no thought or care of her; he only frightened her brother away to be avenged upon your most illustrious. And this is truth, so help me our dear Mother! and all the truth, and your excellency can go to this lane of Papa Bonifazio and ask for yourself; and you will order your agents to pay me the thousand crowns to-morrow, and no more ado.'

By the white light of the full moon she saw the face of her auditor grow grey and colourless, and his hands close on the stone edge of the balustrade as though they gripped the throat of Magliabecchi.

'By the Virgin and by Venus!' muttered the old woman to herself, 'if I were a great prince and a rich lord, who can buy what he wishes, like you, much

would I care for a pale, puny beggar like her! What queer mad creatures they are, these mighty folk, with the pick of the plums in their hands, and only hungering for a wretched windfall.'

Briefly, he ordered her to go on the morrow to his agents to receive her price and put her cross to the necessary documents, and then he bade her begone. She withdrew from the window her frowsy and witch-like head, and he, delivered from her presence, paced up and down the loggia, and sought the shadows of the gardens with a ceaseless restlessness which sorely tried the patience of Ruffino, who, half-asleep, paced after him drowsily, only allowing himself to slumber at intervals, when his master sat down on some stone bench or marble chair.

Castiglione knew what the hospitals of Rome were: he had visited them often. The thought of his lost love in their dirt, their neglect, their foul atmosphere, their crowded corridors, made his heart grow sick, and tainted the sweet-perfumed air of the gardens around him. How could he hope that her already overtaxed strength had resisted the grief of her brother's death and the trials of physical as well as mental suffering?

In that little house facing the loggia she had



been sustained by familiarity, habit, hope, the support of regular work, the incentive of a strong affection; but her brother dead, and she alone in a strange place, and incapacitated by illness from seeking or doing work, even her youth and heroism could have found no force against such accumulated trials.

He scarcely doubted that death had taken her also from her misery, and a poignant self-reproach added its bitterness to his sorrow.

Why had he let pass those earlier summer days, in which she had been within the reach of his voice, the touch of his hand?

‘I was a coward,’ he thought; ‘I could not bring myself to admit that I loved a woman of whom I knew nothing. I was afraid to look a dupe in my own sight and the sight of others.’

With earliest morning he sent his men to the place where Magliabecchi lived, and to the various quarters where permission to visit the hospitals, lay and clerical, was to be obtained. The orders of admission were at once accorded to him by the civil and by the ecclesiastical authorities; but of the physician there was no news: his apartment was shut up, he had gone away the previous day, saying that he was going to the sea; several heavy boxes had gone with him. He had no doubt become alarmed

by the sense that he was watched, and had left the city in which his evil ways so long had prospered, having made sure of his revenge before he had looked his last on Rome.

Castiglione, with a heavy sense upon him that all he could do now would be done too late, turned his steps first to that wretched passage-way which the old woman had indicated to him as the alley of Papa Bonifazio. It was still scarcely more than Ave Maria, and the network of streets had the stillness and comparative freshness of early morning in them.

The place named after the hapless Boniface was one of the most wretched haunts of Rome, close to the fish-market, and inhabited only by the poorest of the poor. Twenty-four hours in its sights and sounds and odours would surely have been enough to strike down with fever such a delicate organisation as that of the Russian girl.

He found there that what the woman Pilotti had said had been true : two young people answering to the description of the young Nelaguine and his sister had been dwellers for a little time in one of the upper floors of a wretched house reeking with damp and dirt, black with charcoal smoke, and hung about with fishing-nets and rags of all kinds. The people of the street told him that the young man had died,

soon after his arrival there, of ague and fever they believed; that his sister had fallen insensible when the pauper's shell had been brought for his body, and the *beccamorti* had carted it away. No one confessed to have noticed what had become of her: they thought some nuns had carried her away in a litter, but they were not sure. Nobody seemed to think that it could matter; and they all stared in amaze to see this grand gentleman vex his soul over such a search.

Weary and heart-sick, he returned to his own palace to seek the orders to visit the various asylums and hospitals. It was now noon. Ruffino came to him, and gently claimed his recognition.

Ruffino knew that his master was unhappy and ill at ease, and his sympathetic nature made him subdue his proud temper, and put aside his sense of injury at having been left at home alone, and offer all such condolences as it was in his power to express.

‘Why leave me here? I am your one safe guide and counsellor,’ said his black eyes, wistfully and eloquently.

Even in the profound sorrow and anxiety of his own thoughts, Castiglione was touched by that mute appeal.

‘Poor little Ruffo ! will you come with me ?’ he said to his little comrade. ‘Perhaps your finer senses may find her ; mine are too blunt, and dulled by too long selfishness.’

Ruffino understood the permission, and capered wildly, turning round upon himself like a teetotum, and springing thrice his own height in the air.

Then, conscious that he compromised his dignity in the eyes of the servants standing about the ante-rooms, he sobered down, and with a shake to adjust his new gold necklace properly under his ruff, he assumed a staid and grave demeanour, and walked after his master, step for step, out of the ante-rooms, down the staircase, and into the court, where Castiglione’s mail-phaeton awaited him.

Grave as a judge, Ruffino sat upon the cushion beside his owner. He was well used to that seat of honour, and many a time, from a similar eminence, had surveyed the world in the Allée des Acacias of Paris, in the Ringstrasse, and in the drive in Hyde Park. But now his spirit was too anxious to take pleasure in looking around him ; he knew that his friend was out, not for pastime, but in trouble. The spectacle of the streets had no interest for him ; his loyal little soul was sad because his beloved one was not happy.



They drove from one hospital and refuge to another, entering them all, searching them diligently; but with no avail.

‘Let my dog come in with me, for I seek a lost friend, and his recognition will be quicker than mine,’ said Castiglione to the authorities, who were scandalised at the sight of a four-footed visitant trotting through their wards and corridors. The rank of a Prince of Montefeltro procured indulgence to his caprice, and Ruffino came through these terrible abodes of woe, his nose to the ground and his intelligence on the alert, not knowing why he was brought thither, but fully determined to do his duty whenever he should find out what it was.

He looked diligently under all the beds, for he thought that it was the yellow cat who was wanted at last by a just, though too slow, Nemesis: and wan smiles came on colourless, thin lips, and faces dark with pain and rage cleared for a moment as the little busy form, ringing its silver bells, trotted briskly from one pallet to another, bringing to the wretched beings lying thereon memories of mirthful, healthful hours, gone for evermore, when, with just such a little dog as this, they had run through the blowing grasses after a hopping quail, or driven a wine-cart cheerily, through the fresh autumn nights, up to the gates of Rome.



Castiglione, worn with disappointment and weary with apprehension, was made more wretched still by all these scenes of torture, which he could do so little to alleviate.

‘As God lives above us,’ he swore to himself, ‘if I find her I will give my life to help the poor!’

All his past life of pleasure looked to him a frivolous, base thing, beside this immense, unquenchable, unpitied, utterly useless, world of woe.

He visited every refuge for the ailing and the poor; but neither in the wards of the hospitals nor in the entries of their books could he discover any trace of her; she seemed totally, irrevocably lost under the deep and swift oblivion which attends the wretched in the crowds of a great city.

Untiring, Ruffino and he went forth each day, and looked all shapes of misery in the face, and saw all forms of pain, and even all forms of crime and madness.

‘What is it?’ Ruffino’s little face asked, inquiringly and wistfully, knowing that they looked for something, but not knowing what: unless, indeed, it were the yellow cat. But she, he came to think, it could not be, because every evening from the loggia he saw her sitting, in bumptious and insolent security, upon roof or lintel or gutter, and of her his master

took no kind of notice whatever. Ruffino came to the conclusion, so painful to all of us, and coupled with such sad disillusion, that what he thought was of such supreme, universal, imperial importance really did only interest himself alone.

## XII

ON the fifth day after the news he had received from Veneranda Pilotti, he heard that Magliabecchi had been traced to Brindisi, and there had taken steamer to Constantinople, safely putting seas and mountains betwixt himself and danger. The fox had got away, and no force or skill could find him, and make him disgorge the secret which he carried.

‘If she is dead,’ thought Castiglione, ‘I will follow him, and run him down, if I hunt through every town in Asia: she shall not perish unpitied and unavenged.’

He had now searched through every hospital, every refuge, every asylum. There were only the prisons left to search; it was possible that under some false charge she had been taken there, or even on no charge at all; for utter poverty and friendlessness are crimes punishable and punished in every State. The weather was cooler; the first rains had fallen; the

air was fragrant with the scent of orange-flowers and of the odorous olive : as he stood on the loggia in the evening silence, he felt as if his heart would break that he could not find her in her misery, and raise her up, King Cophetua-like, into all that peace, that beauty, that sweetness, which were around him. He had so much to give, and he could not reach her to give her anything.

‘ Let us try once more, Ruffino,’ he said, sadly ; and he and his little comrade went out, and down through the great Piazza of St. Peter’s, where the fountains were leaping in the moonlight and the ebon shadows were lying between the great pillars of the colonnades. From the square, the mighty mass of his own palace, with its gardens rising behind it, could be seen dark against the lustrous, starry skies.

He left the Piazza, and descended the street where the Fornarina once dwelt, and where beautiful Raffaele must so often have passed, with passion-winged feet, going to and from his garden-pavilion in the Borghese woods. As he reached the end of it, one of his own servants, running breathless after him, handed him a telegraphic message which had just been left at the palace. He had of late given such imperative orders that any message or missive

of any kind brought to his house should be delivered to him immediately, that his people, having seen him cross the square, had sent this on after him.

He tore it open, vaguely hoping against hope that it might bring him some news of her, though it was scarcely possible or probable that it would do so. He read the printed words by the light of a lamp in a doorway. They said :

*'The girl is dying of the perniciousa. If you find her, and get all the skill of Rome, you will not keep her alive. I leave Italy, taking my honest savings with me. Adieu. You will remember Magliabecchi as one who paid his debts.'*

The telegram had been sent from the port of Brindisi.

Castiglione's hand clenched on the paper as if it were a living thing which stung and poisoned him. The snake had crawled safely away, leaving its venom behind it.

Dying of the worst form of Roman fever, and none knew where, in what haunt of misery, in what den of torture ! He walked on and on like a blind man, taking his way where chance led him, followed like his shadow by Ruffino—a little white figure glancing in the moonlight, with bright eyes which shone like balls of phosphorus.

Castiglione felt as if he could not ever again return to his own home, where every luxury awaited him, and where art and ease were his willing hand-maidens, whilst she, the innocent and hapless child, was dying, or already dead, alone and unpitied, amidst the haste and heartlessness of a great city. He wandered on and on, not noting whither he went, for once forgetful of the faithful friend by his side. The Roman streets were unsafe at such an hour for a man so well-known for his rank and riches: but of that he took no thought; he walked on and on, until he had unconsciously reached the labyrinth of poor tenements which lie along the Tiber under the vast shadow of St. Angelo.

Ruffino, checking all his impulses of curiosity and investigation under the stern duty of watching over his master's safety in these foul and noisome places, walked steadily, with his nose to the ground and all his fine and delicate senses sharply on the alert, ready at the smallest sign of danger to give alarm, and leap with all the courage of his race on any assailant.

As he reached the edge of the river, even the restless wretchedness of Castiglione's meditation could not wholly blind him to the beauty of the scene: the moonlight made the Tiber waters a



silver pathway fit for the perished gods of Rome ; the boats rocked silently upon the rippling surface ; grand masses of white cloud sailed above head where the angel in mockery crowned the Mausoleum of Hadrian.

He stood still on the brink of the river, and gazed at the illumined loveliness, with a vague sense of its awful beauty penetrating the gloom of his passionate thoughts.

It was late, and there was little sound or movement near : a string of mules was going along the opposite shore, a priest was passing over the bridge, from a boat under the walls of the fortress there came the voice of a boatman chanting a barcarolle.

Ruffino, subdued by the stillness and the shadows, was mute, standing small and white against the gloom from the massive walls.

Suddenly he whimpered, moved restlessly, and pricked his ears, as his wont was when excited or disturbed.

His master did not heed him ; he was gazing down the river : never, never, he thought, would he find his lost love on earth.

But Ruffino grew more and more agitated : his hair stood erect, his body trembled, his tail moved over his back ; he whined, and gave little short,

sharp barks ; then, without waiting for leave or sympathy, he darted away, across to a litter of cordage and sail and boats turned keel upwards which were lying black and shapeless on the shore. Reaching them, he scratched and whined and barked, and ran to and fro, and returning to his master, leaped on him, whimpering and quivering, his phosphorescent eyeballs flashing in the dark.

‘What is it, Ruffo?’ said Castiglione, absently ; he thought the little dog had found some rat, or cat, or sleeping lizard.

But Ruffino ran back again to the boats, and expressed in his own language such intense excitement and such rapturous pleasure, that his master followed him, lifted the old sails which hung above a broken oar, and there, by the light of the moon, he saw a woman’s form, sleeping or senseless. As her face was turned to the rays of the moon, and he put aside the heavy hair which covered it, he recognised the face which had haunted him through so many days and nights.

With a loud cry, he fell on his knees on the sandy grass.

A rat hurried away from beneath the rotten wood on which her head was lying, as a rat ran once from the skull of Dante.

‘My love, my love, awake!’ he cried to her. ‘It is I. Look at me. Listen to me. You must live, and live for me!’

The girl, who was lying in the heavy stupor of fever, vaguely understood ; her great brown, pathetic eyes unclosed and looked up at him. She had been driven out of her miserable lodging a few hours before, and had crept down to the riverside to die. A shudder shook her frame ; she recognised the dog and his master.

‘Volodia is dead,’ she whispered. ‘He bade me never—never—never see you ; I promised——’

Castiglione kissed her worn and wasted hands, her burning brow, her hair, damp with the dews of the night.

‘Volodia, if his spirit lives, forgives me now,’ he murmured in her ear. ‘My poor pale angel of sorrow, I will teach you what happiness means.’

### XIII

ON her marriage-day, three months later, he presented her with the title-deeds to all the land and houses contained in the *Viccolo* of St. Anastasia.

‘You can do as you will with it all,’ he said to her : ‘pull it down, build it up, lay it into the

gardens, or make an orphanage or a hospital there, just as it pleases you best. It is wholly yours.'

She smiled, with tears in her eyes.

'If it may be so indeed, I will send the bad people away, but not the good ones, because, though it is all so poor, yet it is a home to them, and I think we have no right to turn them out of it. But we will purify it, and plant it, and make it sweet and wholesome, and everyone shall be happy there, and lead peaceful and cleanly lives; and all the animals shall be well cared for and kindly treated in it; and at the little corner-house—my little house—we will make a dwelling-place for some poor old, friendless women, and we will put over the door a little statue of San Rocca and his dog, for the sake of my dear friend Ruffino.'

Ruffino heard his name, and coughed discreetly, to remind them that he also had his own views on the subject of that lane, which was now part of his kingdom. No beauty of art and architecture, no holiness, or cleanliness and sweetness, no verdure of foliage and blossoming of flowers, could be so delightful, or so excellent, or so acceptable, either, to San Rocca or to himself, as the successful destruction of the yellow cat.

It is still his dream of the future.





AN ORCHARD



## AN ORCHARD

‘YES, I planted it all myself, fifty years ago come Easter. Easter fell early that year. I had married at Epiphany, and that made me more willing to work. Yes, I planted every tree, then and later on. Of course, they have had to be renewed, some of them. But every bit of it is my own labour, the work of my own hands. I never let my lads have aught to do with the trees.’

So said the master of the orchard, with harmless pride. The trees were almond, peach, and pear trees, lying full south on a sunny hillside. He who had planted it was a Tuscan peasant, whose forefathers had dwelt there for four hundred years. The place was called Satinella, and the family name was Nerozzi; but they were always called the Satinelli, the name of the ground replacing the name of the race for all their country-side, as is so often the custom in Tuscany.

Lindoro Nerozzi (il Satanello to all his neigh-

bourhood) was a tall, hale, handsome man of seventy years old, with black eyes, still full of light, and an abundance of white and curling hair. He had lived here all his life, and had improved the soil vastly, for it lay on a mountain slope, and was by nature barren; but he, with patience and perseverance, had made the stony earth fruitful, had carried up fresh soil, and laboured on it ceaselessly from morning to evening, and this orchard of his own creation surrounding the house was the apple of his eye, the joy of his soul. In January the almond-trees were clouds of rosy blossom; and the pear-trees were, later on, white as snow; and the peach-trees, still later, were marvels of pink-hued blossom; and in the grass beneath the trees daffodils and narcissus and hyacinths grew, and in the boughs nightingales often made their nests. Of all this loveliness the old Satanello had not much perception: he liked it vaguely, without knowing what it was that he liked. The mind of the peasant is usually slow, and dull in its perceptions, as the mind of the oxen that he guides before his plough. But the place itself he loved passionately: he had seen it grow little by little; he had called it out of the barren ground, as Moses called the water-spring; and its blossom and its fruits were doubly his own, because without him they would never have been there.

He paid the half of the value they brought honestly to his landlord, for the Tuscan is always obedient and conservative by nature. But the orchard seemed none the less his own to him ; his people had been on that same soil for centuries, and he himself had run about there in his childhood with brown, naked feet, and every day of every year all through his manhood had seen the sunrise widen in the east, and the sunset flame and fade in the west, through the straight stems of the pine-trees and cypresses which stood like sentinels round his home.

Far down beneath him stretched the Vale of Arno, a sea of verdure flecked with golden lights ; and up above him rose the woods, with their stone-pines, and their heather, and their yellow-flowering gorse. He had known misfortune ; he was old, and his children had died before him, and almost all his grandchildren, too : only one girl, Candida, and one boy, Lucio, were left to him, and lived there with him. And he was satisfied as to their future : ‘ for you will be here after me,’ he said to the lad, ‘ and you will marry early, as I did, and then you will wed Candida to some honest, hard-working fellow, who will take her off your hands ; and the trees are all sound, fine, full-bearing trees, and they will keep you and yours for many a day, never fear.’



Lucio was a good little lad, only fourteen, but strong and sturdy, and very docile. Candida, a year or two older, was not so good: she was lazy, and could be saucy, and liked her own way, and did not like work. She was pretty, too, and knew it, and when she could get a few pence to herself spent them on finery, and sulked for a week after every feast-day because her grandfather would not give her her grandmother's pearls.

'They shall be yours when you marry, but not before,' said Satanello; and she thought it very hard.

'You only love the trees, Nonno!' she said, angrily; and the old man laughed. 'When you are as lovely and as useful as the trees, my wench, then you shall have the pearls; but I see no sign of that yet. You are only a weed, *bambina*; a pretty weed, like the mouse-ear, but of no use at all to any one.'

For she let the soup burn, and scorched the linen when she ironed it, and made the bread heavy as lead, and let the pig get amongst the young peas and the fowls scratch up the spinach-plants, and spent all her time looking at her own face in a bit of cracked mirror; so that often little Lucio had to turn cook instead of her, and her grandfather was forced to scold her seriously, which he hated to do, for she was the child of the son whom he had loved the

most. Nevertheless, they were very happy together at Satinella ; and if the girl were idle and wayward, 'marriage cures all that,' thought her grandfather, and he had his eye on a youngster on whom he meant to bestow her, a fine young fellow at the forge at the foot of the hill.

'That will leave Lucio's hands clear, and the land will keep him and his when I am gone,' the old man thought, as he pruned his fruit-trees in autumn.

But although he said, 'when I am gone,' to himself and to others, he did not in the least realise that he was old, and that life could not last very long for him. He was strong and hale, having lived in that pure, high air all his years ; and it seemed to him that he was rooted in the soil like his old pear-trees : very old they were, the pear-trees, gnarled and mossy, and grey with lichens ; but they bore richer fruit still than the young ones.

'They could not get on without me, nor I without them,' said Satanello a hundred times a season.

He worked amongst them early and late, and when he rested, it was on the low stone wall facing them that he liked best to sit. Pears, and peaches, and almonds, they all grew together in amity, their boughs touching, their roots crossing, their shadows waving on the sunny, thick grass below them, free

and careless and beautiful, like apple-trees in Devonshire or Normandy.

It was his world to him, and all its population was familiar to him : the great green beetles, the little green lizards, the big death's-head moths, the huge water-beetles, the stoat coming stealthily through the gloom, the chattering tree-frog, the beautiful butterflies. He never hurt any of them more than he could help, and his shrewd observation had told him of the good birds ; he never molested the nests that were made upon the branches and down in the grass of his orchard.

If the snake do not eat me,  
If the thorn do not prick me,  
If the man do not kill me,  
I shall sing my zee, zee, zee !

says the Tuscan rhyme ; and Satanello used to say the rhyme, and like to hear the ' zee, zee, zee,' which began to be heard everywhere around, from bush and briar, as soon as the wild sorrel blossomed in January.

He used to talk to the trees, as people who are much alone grow apt to talk to anything which is the daily companion and constant witness of their solitary lives.

' I have done well by you, and you have done well by me,' he said to them, straightening his back, and resting for a minute from his work. ' You will

find the boy in food and clothing after me, and he will be with you all the days of his life, as I have been. I have taught him all you want and all you like; you are hard to please sometimes, but, Christ! that is more the fault of the weather than of you. When it hails after Palm Sunday, or when it freezes after Fat Thursday, how can you be expected to understand it? You must draw your buds in, as a snail draws in his horns. When the season is reasonable you are never out of humour. All the many years I have known you, never have I had to find fault with you, though when the north wind blew after Easter it was hard lines on you, and on me.'

And the leaves of the pear-trees flickered in the sun, and the slender boughs of the almonds bent under a chaffinch's weight, and the small, pointed, green fruit of the peach-trees swelled in the soft, passing breeze; and the old man was contented that they all understood, and took up his heavy spade, shaped like an ace of clubs, and turned the sods about their roots, while two little wrens made loud twittering over his head, and built a nest in a forked branch of the oldest pear in the orchard.

'Nonno gets daft; hear him chattering and mumbling to those trees,' said Candida to her cousin. But the little lad was of another opinion.



‘Nonno is wiser than we,’ he answered. ‘And the trees are very wise, too, in their ways; how else could they make all that fruit with nothing but the air and the sun to make it out of—will you tell me that?’

‘The fruit grows,’ said Candida, scornfully; ‘and you are as daft as Nonno.’

‘Grows; yes, it grows,’ said Lucio, doubtfully. ‘But it is the trees make it grow. You know the proverb about the vine: “Never let the eye of the vine see your pruning-hook.” If the vine has eyes, why should not the trees in the orchard have ears?’

‘You goose!’ said Candida. ‘That only means that you must not cut them higher than their first eye, or knot.’

But this prosaic explanation did not satisfy Lucio, who had inherited something of his grandsire’s imagination, and really believed that trees could see and hear. After all, if they could do so, it would not be more wonderful than are the death and birth of their foliage, the miracle of their bud and blossom.

‘You will take great care of them, Lucio, when I am gone?’ said the old man to him a hundred times a year; and Lucio always answered, with fervour: ‘The very greatest care, Nonno.’



He was a good little lad, and worked very hard from dawn to sunset, and trotted into the town, half-a-dozen miles off, meekly and willingly, with his burden of fruit or vegetables, and did not gamble or smoke, as many boys did, on the road, and brought every farthing home carefully and soberly to his grandfather.

When the great crop of pears was gathered in the summer months, they were too many for him to carry alone, and Satanello himself slung the big skipsful over his shoulder, and trudged with them down the solitary roads in the heat, sometimes, but rarely, getting a lift behind a neighbour's mule or donkey cart. It was hard living; for the little farm did not yield much, except the products of the orchard. But there was always bread enough in the cupboard, and generally meat in the soup-pot on Sundays and feast-days; so that the old man and the boy wanted nothing more. Candida wanted many things; all the gowns and ribands in the pedlars' packs to begin with, and, most of all, the pearls locked up in the big walnut-wood chest.

The steward of their lord had never troubled them much; he was a stout, jovial man, who cheated his employer, but was not hard on the peasantry, loving wine well, and being good-natured.

One day word came up the hillside that there was to be a new steward; the old one had drunk too much once too often, and had been dismissed.

‘I always knew the *vin santo* would betray that good soul,’ said Satanello, with regret; for he had always got on well with the wine-bibber, though himself the most sober of men.

A little later the new one came to inspect all the outlying farms on the hillside: he had an eye-glass, he had a city air, he spoke with a drawl, he had come fresh from an agricultural college.

‘A fine, new-fangled fool that!’ said Satanello, with sound contempt; and he answered the new comer’s many questions curtly and bluntly.

‘An ill-mannered, ignorant churl,’ thought, in return, the man from the city.

‘What white hands he has!’ said Candida, on whom he had bestowed a condescending smile.

‘White hands!’ echoed her grandfather; ‘whoever saw a *fattore* with white hands? Do you want white hands to weigh wheat, to judge a steer, to tot up a sum, to break in a colt? White hands! Let him take his white hands back to the city desk he came from; we want none of his white hands here, in our honest muck and mould!’

Though the homestead and orchard of Satanello

were isolated on a lonely hillside, with the nearest neighbour three miles off, yet there were not wanting mischief-makers to carry these speechès, and many like them, which the old man made, to the ear of the new steward, at the Fattoria down in the valley ; and the steward said to the landlórd down in the town, that good ground was being ruined by an old boor past work and two useless children, and he suggested, insidiously, to his employer, that since pear-trees seemed to like the soil, espaliers, with choice growths from the Channel Islands, severely trained in modern fashion, would bring in ten times as much as these old and moss-grown trees, growing at their own free-will and fancy. The steward was in favour of all new modes ; and the wire-netting and iron posts, and young trees from the Channel Isles, would he kñew come up to a goodly sum, and enable him to slice off a good percentage as commission on their purchase.

The landlord listened : he was avaricious and silly ; he would spend a pound to save a penny. He was quickly dazzled by any promise of gain, and, though a timid man and a mean one, would walk into a new speculation, which promised well, as the fly walks into the spider's web. The trees were old, certainly, he admitted ; and the man was old, too ; too

old ; and there was only the boy besides. Very likely the steward might be right ; he had not seen the place for many years ; yes, the trees must be nearly past bearing, and the new way of espaliers was better, no doubt. So he gave leave to his underling to write to Jersey to inquire the prices of the finest sorts of pear-trees. He was fresh from a scientific collegè, and believed in pulling down and rooting up as the first and last excellence of progress ; besides, had not the old man at Satinella spoken of him on all the hillside as a new-fangled fool and an up-start ?

The steward was a patient man, and smooth of tongue, and was never betrayed into anger, nor drank overmuch like his predecessor ; but he did not forget an offence quickly, nor easily relinquish a project. When, in pursuit of his duties, he rode past Satinella, he looked under his eyelids at the orchard between its grey stone walls ; whether it was a misty tangle of brown branches in winter, or a glory of lovely blossom in springtime, it found no favour in his sight. It was old fashioned ; and he hated old ways and old things : no profits for himself could be got out of it, no bills set down for it for phosphates, and guanos, and liquid manures ; the sturdy old trees, like their old husbandman, wanted nothing of modern



chemicals and modern cleverness. The orchard, making a smiling landscape on the rude hillside, with its sweet, fresh odours, and its flood of song from nesting-birds, was an eyesore to him; he longed to see its branches broken up into faggots of firewood.

‘Your trees are as old as you,’ said he, once, to Satanello, who replied, gruffly: ‘Maybe; but we both do a good year’s work.’

Satanello never lifted his head when the steward rode by, and, if called to by him, only very slowly and reluctantly touched his hat and left off his labours. It was a small, out-of-the-way homestead, which was a mere atom in the widely-scattered estate to which it belonged, and he had always been used to do very much as he chose upon it. Four hundred years the generations of his race had lived and laboured on that slope of the wild hillside; wars and revolutions, and dynasties and invasions, and battles and riots, and sieges and encampments, all going on in the vale below them, but all to them wholly indifferent, except when a tongue of fire shot up as high as their own straw-stack, or a free-lance dragged them down, tied to his stirrup-leather.

‘Your grandfather is not quite himself always, is



he, my pretty one?' said the steward to Candida, meeting her on the road one afternoon.

Candida laughed, to show her pretty, shining, white teeth.

'Nonno is old,' she answered. 'It is a pity they live to be so old.'

The steward patted her rosy cheeks. She and he met often in the pine-woods; his scientific college had not taught him to deny himself the pleasure of deceiving a round-faced, red-lipped, soft, and blushing little girl, with a skin like a peach and a body as plump as a pigeon's. And to Candida he seemed a very great and powerful personage. But the old man stood in the way: to deceive the girl was easy, but it was not so to mislead and blind the shrewd and vigilant grandfather.

'His white hands have been dipped in bird-lime; take care of them,' the old man said to his little girl; and Candida was sulky, and made the bread heavier than ever. But Satanello kept sharp watch over her, and it was not easy to elude his observation. And the steward, in revenge for his thwarted plans, returned again and again to the subject of the espaliers and the Channel-Island pears, and drew up such an array of figures and such battalions of facts, that at length his master said to him, half-ashamed,

half-impatient: 'I have full confidence in your judgment; do what you deem best: the old man is a slave to old ways, and will never learn any other.'

The steward replied with many protestations of his own unworthiness and humble devotion. He had got all he wanted; his hands were free.

One bright November day Satanello was at work in his orchard; Candida was well in sight, beating linen in the brook which ran past the house, and Lucio was plucking the ripe cones of the millet, which grew in a narrow strip under the orchard-wall. The cypresses and the still green poplars waved against a radiant sky, and in the boughs linnets and woodlarks were trilling their autumn songs.

'We'll have a rare fine winter,' thought the old man. 'The astrologer says so, and it is plain to see, if he did not say it.'

The astrologer was an almanack-maker, of great local renown, who published with his almanacks weather-predictions, agricultural counsels, and a portrait of himself with a conical cap, a long robe, and a number of occult instruments.

Satanello was standing on a ladder, cutting some dead wood out of one of his pear-trees; the little yellow dragon's mouth was bright in the grass beneath; the deep bells of a distant monastery were

tolling melodiously. Lucio's clear voice was singing a *couplet* as he shook and stripped the rustling stalks of the maize. It was all luminous, and serene, and gay, and peaceful in the golden November sunlight; from the wet grass and the fallen leaves sweet, pungent odours filled the air. The heart of the old man was glad as he looked up at the blue sky through the network of grey-brown boughs and twigs.

The rattle of wheels creaking up the stony hill-road jarred on the stillness; another few minutes four men came in sight, climbing up the foot-path.

'Good-day, Nerozzi,' said the steward; 'we are come to measure the ground.'

'The ground has done without measuring long enough,' said the old man, standing on his ladder, and lifting, reluctantly, his hand to his felt hat.

'Get to work!' said the steward to his men.

Candida, wringing out her linen, laughed to herself; she knew what was to follow.

Lucio drew near, with anxious eyes.

Satanello turned round on his ladder, and went on at his work with the billhook.

'New-fangled ways!' he thought, with contempt, as the men drew their measuring-tapes along the ground. 'If the master don't know the length and breadth of his land by this time it is odd indeed;

for his people have been here just half the time that mine have, and the half is two hundred years.'

And he chopped away at the dead wood with his billhook.

The steward looked up at him with a slow, cruel smile.

'You need not take the trouble to do that,' he said; 'the trees will be cut down to-morrow.'

'What!——'

The old man turned round on the ladder, with all the blood from his body hot in his face.

Then, with a short, contemptuous laugh, he resumed his work.

'Fools be many,' he said, curtly; 'but the master is not quite such a fool as to send such a message as that to me.'

'The trees will be all cut down to-morrow, and the soil turned, and laid open; and in the spring we shall replant the ground; these cumbersome old trees have wasted good earth too long. We have been too indulgent, and left you alone too much, but it is time to alter all this; the new systems economise labour and yield double profits.'

Satanello came down from the ladder; his face had ceased to be ruddy, and was ashen-grey. The cold, slow, unmoved tone of the steward carried conviction

with it; but still he would not believe, he could not believe: it was too horrible, too hideous.

Wringing out her linen, Candida laughed.

‘Are you mad, you poor jackanapes?’ said the old man, hoarsely. ‘You have set everything else topsy-turvy on the lands, but you’ll not come here to do it. I planted the first tree here fifty years ago come Easter, and the trees are mine, mine, mine! Get you out!’

‘Never mind him; go on,’ said the steward to the men who were measuring the ground.

‘Cut down my trees!’ shouted Satanello. ‘Lord forgive you for your blasphemy! The trees are the finest trees on the country-side, and they are mine, mine, mine! The priest has blessed them every year, and every year they have brought forth in peace and plenty. You should sooner kill me than the trees. The lad loves them as I love them, and he will feed them as they have fed me. Cut down my trees! You are mad; stark, staring mad! Get off the ground, you scoundrels! get off it, I tell you! We will see what the master says to-morrow. How dare you come here with your lies in his name?’

‘Go on!’ said the steward to his men, taking no more heed of the old man’s fury than of the babbling



and roaring of the little stream which came down from the hills above. The old man flung down his billhook, and took up his heavy spade, and swung it above his head as though it were a mere rod of hazel.

‘The first man that touches one of my trees shall have his skull cut in two with this!’ he said, with a sound in his voice which meant more than the words or the gesture.

The steward changed colour, for he was not brave, and murmured a few sentences in a low tone to his underlings, of which the words, the ‘carabineers,’ and ‘the law,’ were all which reached the strained ears of little Lucio. Then he called off his men sullenly, and went out of the orchard, taking no notice of the action or the spade of Satanello.

The old man brought his spade down on the earth with a loud thud, and laughed aloud once more. ‘The white-livered cur! He! to dare touch my trees. Well! the master shall hear of it to-morrow.’

Then he wiped his hot, red forehead, and passed his hand over his eyes with a dazed look.

‘A parcel of fools! Cut the trees! Cut the trees!’ he shouted, ‘Lord! of course he only said it to hurt me. Nobody could be such a madman as that.

Trees that have not their like in bearing, not on the whole hillside.'

And he laughed again—a laughter which was jarred and joyless; and swore bitterly and fiercely, staring up at the brown twigs and boughs. Lucio was crying, and Candida, too; the boy because his grandfather and the orchard were menaced, the girl because the steward had not looked at her.

'Good children, good children,' muttered Satan-ello; 'but do not be afraid, it is all moonshine. That upstart only said it to hurt me. I will go see the master to-morrow. I have never had speech with him face to face, but now I must have it. He shall take that knave off the land. Cut the trees! Cut the trees! Better cut his own throat.'

And he picked up his billhook, and climbed the ladder, and began hewing out the dead wood as though nothing had happened; but his hand shook, and the steel curve of the tool flickered before his dimmed sight.

When twilight came he did not touch his supper; he sat in the porch, and watched the stars come out above the brown haze of the orchard-branches. It was cold; but he did not feel the cold; he was thinking over all he would say to the master, rehearsing, planning, meditating the interview which

he would have on the morrow. It was so still he could hear the rats run, and the stoats steal through the orchard-grass; in the strong, white moonlight the tracery of the branches was as distinct as though they were drawn in pencil on a silvered plate.

His trees!—his trees, which stood about the house like brothers, like children, like friends!—his trees, which had been about him all the days of his life! Cut down his trees!

His teeth clenched on his pipe-stem, and he laughed again in his throat; and then his eyes filled with sharp, salt tears, and he went out in the moonlight, and put his arms about the stem of the oldest pear-tree, and laid his rugged forehead against its rugged bark: they had been companions for so long.

When the day broke, he dressed himself in his Sunday-going clothes, and put his big silver watch in his pocket, to go down to the city and let the master hear the truth. Simple souls are always sure that it is only necessary to tell the truth, and justice will be done whenever they tell it.

‘Mind and let nobody in, Lucio, till I come back,’ he said to the boy, who promised obedience. There was no means of keeping anyone out, for the door always stood open, and the stone wall was not

higher than a man's knees ; but little Lucio barred the low gate carefully, and brought the dog to lie down before it, and followed, with wistful eyes, the figure of his grandfather, as the old man went down the stony path.

At a bend in the path there was a wooden shrine : Satanello knelt down, and said an Ave there ; then, as he rose, he looked back once more at his homestead. He was near enough to see the white body of the dog, the yellow curls of Lucio, the various shapes of the orchard-trees, with the thrushes flying about them, and the fleecy clouds sailing above. He crossed himself, and blessed them ; then he went on his way to the city.

When he had been away an hour or more, twenty men walked up from the Fattoria ; they carried hatchets and pickaxes, and other tools, and coils of rope ; at their head was the steward, and on each side of him a gendarme with sabre and uniform. The sun was risen.

When the day was far spent Satanello toiled up the steep ascent ; he was bathed in sweat, covered with dust, hot, and footsore, and very weary. He had made his long tramp for nothing ; the landlord was not in the city, the servants of his palace would not say where he was. 'Come next week,'

was all the reply he received; he had wasted the whole day uselessly. 'Never mind, I will go back next week,' he thought; and he cheered himself with the thought of his evening's rest and his good bed of sacking and maize leaves.

The sky had clouded over in the afternoon, and the evening shadows had fallen early, and his sight not being so clear as it had used to be, he thought his eyes were at fault because there was a look about his home which was unfamiliar. It looked barer, colder, less sheltered.

'It is the way the light falls, and I grow blind as a mole,' he said to himself, with a cruel pain of vague apprehension gnawing at his heart.

He pressed on up the steep path, regardless of his fatigue, his aching limbs, the stones over which he stumbled. With a shrill cry the little figure of Lucio flew through the shadows.

'Oh, Nonno! Nonno!' he shrieked. 'Nonno! the trees are down! Don't go up, don't go up! the trees are down!'

With a great and terrible oath, the old man threw the boy out of his path, and tore headlong up the slope, as though the blood of youth were boiling in his veins. The trees were felled, the orchard was a thing of the past. Hewn through at their roots, they



lay prone on the ground, fallen one on another, their branches entangling like the hair of dead bodies, their shattered trunks eloquent in their mute ruin; their boughs and bark and lichen strewing the grass in confused litter; the startled birds flying still, in the gloom, with unhappy lamentation, over the prostrate shapes of the friends which so long had sheltered them. The trees were down. Nevermore would the nightingales nest and the narcissus blossom beneath them.

The old man stood and gazed, his eyes wide open, his veins swollen, his breath choking in his throat. Then, without a word, he fell forward, and lay, as the trees lay, flat and helpless on the earth.

Life lingered in him three days, and consciousness came back to him in a measure; he kept saying perpetually, day and night: 'The trees, the trees, save the trees!' and then, again, would cry out that the butcher was at his throat, was cleaving his skull, was severing his limbs: for he was dying like the trees.

On the night of the fourth day Death took him, his eyes staring to the last through the lattice to look at the trees where they were stretched on the earth.

Lucio wept passionately, flung, face downwards,

upon the old dead body ; and the dogs, trembling and moaning, pressed close to his side. But Candida found the keys of the oak chest, took the pearls out of their hiding-place, clasped them round her throat, and stole away from the house of mourning.



TROTTOLINO





## TROTTOLINO

TROTTOLINO came singing through the canes.

It was a day in early summer, with light, fragrant winds, which blew the riband-like leaves of the canes to and fro, and ruffled into gentle ripples the green waters of the stream by which they grew. Trottolino had received many baptismal names from Holy Church; but none of them were ever used. He was Trottolino to all the world, though he now was twenty-one years of age.

He was a very pretty lad, small, but admirably made, and lithe as a deer. He had a round face, with laughing eyes, auburn curls, a mouth like a pomegranate flower, and shining, snow-white teeth. He was always gay and merry.

He was a baker's boy, and went about the country with the big, moon-like loaves piled in a small, blue, covered cart with a white awning, drawn by a donkey which was very small, too, but sturdy and swift, and on the best of terms with its driver. What busi-

ness was it of anyone's if Trottolino and his donkey took a nap on the roadside grass, or loitered where the fish were leaping in the river, or plucked a peach or two from a wayside tree, or strayed now and then into the grassy paths under the vines? The customers waited for their bread, indeed; but then, when Trottolino did appear, his laugh was so irresistible, as he murmured '*Pazienza!*' that none could ever find it in their hearts to scold or to report him. Trottolino could sing very cheerily, too; and he had an old mandoline tucked in the back of the cart, which, when he traversed lonely lanes or bits of solitary moorland he would take out, and, with the reins safe knotted away on his arm, would wake the echoes with its chords, while he sang, with a full, gay, tenor voice, the songs of the country-side.

Many a lonely cottage and waterside mill had its doorways filled by women and children as these echoes floated to them. '*È il Trottolino*' (Here is the little spinning-top!) they said to one another, and would laugh, and call out, and ask him in; and though the delivery of the loaves was sadly hindered by his popularity and his melodies, his days were much the brighter for both. Not very many years ago Tuscan people all made their own bread, and would no more have thought of eating

bakers' bread than of eating the smooth white stones of the river-bed ; but now, except in farmhouses, no home-made bread is seen, and everyone goes to the baker's, to the injury of their digestions and finances—an example of that curious increase of improvidence and indolence which is the especial sign of all modern progress. So Trottolino's rounds were long, and his halting-places many, in the fragrant, fertile countryside which he traversed.

The donkey knew as well as he every house by heart, and would quicken his steps of his own accord whenever they drew near any doorway, more hospitable than others, where a draught of *mezzo vino* for his driver was likely to be accompanied by a wisp of tares or an armful of grass for himself.

Trottolino's master was more honest than many bakers are, and his loaves were solid, and of fair weight. He was a big, brawny man, who spent most of the day on his threshold, stripped to the waist in warm weather, and wearing a red, conical cap. His share of the business was to display himself thus ; the bread was made and baked indoors by his women and his apprentices. Trottolino did little with oven or trough ; his merrier mission was to scour the country with the little blue cart.

His people were poor : his father was a bricklayer,

and his brother a mason. There were three sisters : pretty, saucy girls, younger than he, who were always straying about the lanes with their straw-plaiting as an excuse for being idle. They had a little cottage at the angle of a wood, a mile from the village where the bakery was. It was old and tumbledown ; but the sweet-smelling firs stood around, and above it, and near it.

The shallow green river purred over its stones, carrying trout and perch in its clear ripples, and often brushed by the low-flying wings of freshwater birds. The mother and grandmother did the house-work : cooked, sewed, spun, and kept the family together ; they were happy, cheerful, affectionate people, and it was the pride of their hearts to see Trottolino, in the blue cart, winding up the sandy path into the pine-woods, and disappearing behind the tall canebrakes by the river.

He was a favourite with his employer. His small weekly wage was a vast help to his family. And the baker's daughter, who was sixteen, looked with favouring eyes on his auburn-curls : she was herself a pretty blonde. She was always called Biondina ; so that the couplet,

O Biondina ! Come sta ?

Oggi sto ben', ma doman' chi sa ?

was often shouted by him to the pastoral solitudes, while the hoofs of Peppino, the little ass, went pit-pat, tic-tac, on the sand of the roads. It was a high-vaulting ambition, no doubt, to dream of wedding Biondina and succeeding to the bakery. But less likely things had happened; and the baker was known to look on with an indulgent smile when Trottolino, *tout endimanché*, brought the girl, on Sundays, a bunch of carnations and a few china roses from his own strip of garden: and Biondina, who was a gentle child, but a little coquette, put them in the front of her bodice or in her waistband, and went with them, thus honoured, to Mass or to Vespers.

‘How can you encourage it?’ said the baker’s wife; ‘the son of a *bracciante*, a lad who drives your ass!’

And the baker laughed, and answered, with good humour: ‘Eh! he might be an ass himself! That would be worse. Trottolino has stuff in him, though he is always laughing and singing: he has doubled the custom, and never is there a centime wrong. These are qualities, my woman: these are qualities that are not picked up every day. Let things wag as they will; they are children as yet, but if they keep in the same mind when he has served his time, I



am not sure that I shall say no. He is small, you say. Yes; he is not a giant. But a bee is a very little thing, and where will you find anything that beats a bee for work?’

This complacency in his master was more or less known to the lad, and made him feel secure as to his future. He was in love with Biondina, but in a simple, innocent, youthful way, with a touch of self-interest in it which made him gay and sanguine. Always in the open air, and living with the utmost frugality, the fumes of passion were unknown to him, and his courtship was a playtime. He would talk a great deal about Biondina to the donkey, who moved its soft ears at her name, because it often got a sour apple to munch from her hand; and Biondina was always in his head as he sang of lilies, and roses, and stars, and doves, and fountains, and all the other gems of the *stornelli*. But it was a boyish love, sweet, not eager, content to wait, into which neither impatience nor bitterness entered. Trottolino, too, always saw everything as he wished it to be: to live in the same place all his life, and go his daily rounds, and laugh and sing and chatter and dance in the farmhouses at vintage-time and carnival-time, this was Paradise to him; he could conceive no other life that could possibly be better.

Everybody was his friend, and every door stood open to him.

He was sorely startled in his happy and unconscious optimism when, one day, a miller to whom he had gone for some flour for his master said suddenly to him :

‘Do you know that they will take almost all the lads of your year next autumn? They want so many men for Africa; the height-standard has been lowered again, and the numbers also.’

Trottolino’s fresh face lost its ruddy colour.

‘Do you mean—no, you don’t mean——?’ he stammered.

‘Yes, I mean that very likely you will have to serve, my poor Trottolino,’ said the miller, who was an authority in the neighbourhood, being a rich man, and one who read the newspapers, and one who had even been known to contradict the syndic of the commune.

‘All the lads go into the regiments; all grist comes to the mill; anybody is good enough to be shot by the blacks, or killed of thirst. That is what we pay taxes for—to lose our lads, and bury good money in foreign sands. It is all wrong, Trottolino, all damnably wrong. The boys and the money are the strength of the country, and

they throw them both away as if they were mildewed barley.'

Trottolino, caring nothing for generalisations, stared at the speaker with distended, horrified eyes.

'I made sure—we made sure——' he muttered; 'they always said there was no sort of fear for me.'

'Times change,' said the miller. 'Who could tell they would go and make fools of themselves in Africa? You are short, to be sure, but they have lowered the standard; and you are very well made. Mark my words, come September they will take you!'

The first tears that he had ever shed in his life rushed into Trottolino's eyes, and he hid them on the short, thick mane of Peppino.

'I could not serve! I could not!' he said, piteously.

The miller, who was not an unkind man, yet who liked to thrust unwelcome truths home to other people, patted his shoulder.

'Hundreds of them say that, but they go. You will see it will be as I say. You won't get out of it. And it won't be playing the lute, and petting the donkey, and ogling Biondina all day long *there*, my poor fellow!'

The mill stood on the river some little way

distant from Trottolino's home. It was a lovely, laughing day in April, with the furrows of the green corn starred with hyacinths and daffodils, and roots of primrose blossoming all along the grassy banks. But all the gladness of it was clouded over for the boy, and the blue heavens ceased to wear a kindly smile for him. He let Peppino amble on his own pace, unhurried, and crop mouthfuls here and there at pleasure; and he went past more than one open door not even hearing the cries from within of 'Trottolino! Eh, Trottolino!' The dread terror of the conscription had laid its cold hand on him, and frozen the laugh on his lips and hushed the music in his soul.

It was late; and when his rounds made him late he was allowed to stable the donkey in a shed at home, on condition that he presented himself with it at the bakery by daybreak. He was met some yards from home by his sisters, who, laughing, and full of glee, climbed up into the cart, and seized the reins, and chattered like so many sparrows in an acre of green peas.

But Trottolino had no heart nor heed for them. When he reached his father's cottage, he bade them see to Peppino, as they often did; and he himself walked up the garden path of shingle.

‘Granny! Mother!’ he said, in a low, unsteady voice, to the two women sitting in the evening shadows in the porch. ‘They say they have lowered the standard; when autumn comes they will take me; everybody is going to Africa.’

‘Ah, no!’ shrieked the women together; while the girls left Peppino at the entrance, and ran in, terrified, to listen. ‘Ah, no! The Madonna forbid! Never, never must they take you, Trottolino—you, our one comfort, our one treasure, our bread-winner, our staff, our darling!—never, never! The dear Mother in Heaven will never permit it!’

‘Our Mother in Heaven never moves a finger for a conscript,’ said Trottolino, sadly. ‘Does she not let all the lads be taken, till half the land lies untilled? They always said I was too short; but it seems they have lowered the standard, they want soldiers so much for Africa.’

‘Where is Africa?’ said the eldest girl; while the mother and grandmother rent the air with their outcries and supplications to Mary, who had been a mother, and ought to know better than to tear lads away from their mothers.

‘Africa is—is——’ muttered Trottolino; ‘I don’t know what it is. It is a place where they bury men and money every day; a sort of oven, I think,



far away beyond the seas; it is a pit, a furnace; I don't know what exactly, but they keep on trying to fill it, and it is never filled.'

A shudder of horror seized the women, and checked in awe, for a moment, their frantic outcries.

'But what have we to do with it?' asked his sister Rosa, who was of a clear and logical mind.

'I don't know. It has to be so,' said Trottolino, with that acquiescence in inscrutable and undisputed authority which is so embedded in the national character, and is as passive as the fatalism of the oriental mind.

'But I cannot go!' he cried aloud. 'I cannot go! Oh granny! oh mother! I cannot go! I shall die if they take me away from Biondina, and Pepino, and the cart, and all of you!'

Then he threw himself down on the threshold, and sobbed, and writhed, and moaned. It was indeed the end of all things for him, poor boy.

A moment later his father and brother came in, tired and hot, their bare feet wet with dew, their open shirts wet with perspiration; they had been digging trenches to plant young vines.

But the miller had been right in his foreboding, and Trottolino, with other lads of the district born in the same year with himself, was forced to go in

due course to the neighbouring town, and be stripped, and examined, and draw his number like the rest. The Government wanted men, and the standard of height was lowered, and even many youths far from healthy or well-shaped were accepted.

Trottolino, who was of short stature, but as healthy as a fine-grown colt, and as admirably shaped as the Faun statue, had no possible physical chance of escape. He drew a fatal number, and was doomed to serve. All his agony was of no avail; he had to go.

In vain the women at home wept, and knew that their chief mainstay was to be torn from them; for the father was weak of health, and the elder lad a cripple and drunkard. If the wheels of the conscription could be stopped by women's tears, it would rust inactive for ever. In due course he had to go.

'You will wait for me, Biondina?' said the boy, imploringly.

'Ah, who knows?' said the girl, lightly and unkindly. 'I could not promise that, Trottolino. Who can say what one will do to-morrow, or next year?'

'But if you love me you will wait,' stammered Trottolino, aghast and timid.

'Eh!' said the little maiden, with a shrug of the

shoulders, 'I like you now you are here. When you are gone, who knows?'

Trottolino did not protest. His spirit was cowed. All his sunny, merry, careless life was killed in him, as a blue lupin growing in the grass is cut down by a mower's scythe.

Biondina was cruel; but so was fate. It seemed natural, inevitable, that one calamity should come on the top of another. It always was so. The king, or the Virgin, or the saints, or somebody, was angry with him, and would have it so. Trottolino was wretched, unspeakably wretched, but he did not rebel. The lamb bleats, but goes meekly to the slaughter. So did he.

And in a little while the village knew him no more.

The baker bought a bigger donkey, and sent a man out with the loaves, a surly, silent, uninterested person, who delivered the bread as a machine might do. The mandoline hung on a rusty nail for awhile, and then was sold by the eldest girl, Rosa, that she might buy a necklace of coloured beads for herself. The mother and grandmother sighed and grumbled and wept for the lost help and the vacant chair. The weeds grew thicker in the little garden, and the soup-pot rarely saw a slice of meat.

‘What a lad he was to work; I never saw his like: and so merry with it all, as if it were so much play!’ said the baker now and then, when angry with others. And Biondina cried a little when she heard her father say this, and looked wistfully at the palm, with its knot of ribbon, and sprig of olive, and bunch of everlasting flowers, which Trottolino had given her at Easter, and which hung over her little narrow bed. But no one can sorrow for ever; and Biondina was a little girl much courted, and before long she ceased to give the donkey an apple on feast-days for old remembrance’ sake when she saw it in the village, and began to smile on one of her suitors, Gian il Morone, or Big Black John, a master-farrier, who had a forge at the other end of the hamlet, and was handsome, and saucy, and well-to-do, and who helped to draw closer the veil of oblivion which absence had already gathered over the memory of the absent.

‘Poor Trottolino!’ thought Biondina sometimes, plaintively: but he had been only a boy, and had had nothing; and he was far away—far away. Who could care for a person gone right away into remote, invisible, unimaginable scenes? His mother might do that; but Biondina could not. Then Gian the farrier had money, and a fine house

next his forge, all yellow stucco and green blinds, as if it were a house in the town; and she would wear a bonnet and a silk frock if she married him, and have a charwoman to do the dirty work, and eat fried liver every day, and be the envy of all her companions.

What chance had a mere memory against all this, or the mute, pathetic, small-voiced reproach of the bunch of palm and olive hung above her bed?

Meanwhile, Trottolino, far away, toiled and sweated and suffered, and broke his heart under the heavy pack and musket, and the brutal orders of the barracks: his pretty, thick, loose curls shorn; his limbs aching, his lungs panting, his body starving, and all his soul sickening, too, for the life he had loved and the affections he had left.

Poor little Trottolino! one amongst thousands of country lads torn from their peaceful hills and vales, their quiet meadows, and their gladsome vineyards, to swell the ranks of ill-clad, ill-fed, ill-treated conscripts, kennelled in filth, pushed to and fro in cattle-trucks, weighted with loads like panting pack-mules: forced down under the brutalising machine of military life, which presses out Nature from the very veins and bones of its victims, and shapes from the warm, living flesh, a puppet, a tool, a thing, a creature



without eyes or ears or sense or will of its own ; a plaything for death, a missile in the merciless hand of the State. Poor little Trottolino !

They sent him far away, to some town of which he had never heard the name. He was miserable, and oftentimes on the march big tears would falter on his curling lashes, and roll down his cheeks, once rosy as the roses before his cottage-door at home.

He was perpetually at fault, and perpetually punished ; he was agile as a goat, lithe as a squirrel, and he had once been gay as a lark. He did not wish to disobey, but obedience was impossible to him ; such blind, stupid, dull obedience against all the laws of Nature, as was now exacted from him. At home, never in all his life had he disobeyed his mother or his master ; he had run to do their bidding like a docile dog. But here in the barracks they brutalised, bewildered, stunned, stupefied, maddened him ; he was always in fault ; often he knew not why or wherefore ; and punishment rained on him, as blows will rain upon a willing horse from cruel hands, until his happy and buoyant spirit was broken, and beaten down into a sullen silence which was as unnatural to him as it is to the rippling and murmuring river to grow still and foetid and stagnant

under the pressure of factory-wheels and the burden of factory-refuse.

They kept him there, in the ugly city of the south, with its baked and dust-strewn plains, its blinding, stony streets, its scorching drought ; dragging his feet in seemingly unending marches, lying dazed with fatigue, and hungry, on the benches of the barrack-yard ; always tired, always footsore, always aching from head to foot ; longing, with a dim, passionate longing, like a chained dog, for his familiar roads, his grassy hillside, his merry, simple life, his people, and his home.

And Biondina ?

Biondina could write a very good, stiff, school-taught handwriting ; but she never sent him a line, nor even a message. The rare letters he got were from his mother and grandmother, written for them by the village priest. They were short and sad ; there was always some bad news in them : once his father had driven the pitchfork through his instep, and was useless for months ; another, the elder brother had the fever, got in making ditches ; another, the big grey sow had died, and the hens had chicken-cholera. Of Biondina there was never a word.

In the rude scrawl which he had learned to write that he might keep account of the bread-sales

he answered their letters faithfully, though he had to go without tobacco to find money for the postage; and he asked always: 'What of my dear Biondina? Tell me always of Biondina! Ask Biondina, for the pity of heaven, to send me some word!'

But Biondina never sent him any word; and in his mother's letters, which came to him about once in three or four months, there never was any hint concerning her. And the time went on; the heavy, hot season passing into a muddy, chilly winter; and that, again, drifting into another burning, arid summer; for it seemed to him that there was neither spring nor autumn, nor anything sweet or fresh, but only blinding heat and piercing cold, in this hideous barrack of a manufacturing city. And then, when four seasons had thus gone by, Trottolino, who was only one of the rank-and-file of an infantry regiment, was sent to Naples, and was drafted off, with his battalion, on board a transport-ship. They were to go to Africa.

He heard the fools in the streets shouting and cheering them as they tramped to the docks; he heard the still greater fools around him on the deck shouting back—poor lads!—and telling one another all the fables narrated to them by the officers; fables of the ruby mines, and the rivers of wine, and the

king's palaces, and the black slave-girls, and the ropes of pearls that they would all have as loot when they should touch the African shores. But Trottolino could not see the shores he left for the great tears that blinded his eyes; and all he did see was what he never would see again—a little cottage in a green garden of herbs and roses; grassy roads winding between thickets of cane; a little donkey trotting merrily along the margin of a stream; a fair-faced maiden, with blue, smiling eyes, and braided hair the colour of ripe wheat, coming coyly out with an apple in her hand. That was all he saw, as the crowded transport-ship, under its cloud of foul smoke, steamed out of the harbour, bearing its living freight to suffer, and pine, and sicken, and swelter, and perish under the brazen skies of Africa.

He was no longer Trottolino.

He had long ceased to be Trottolino.

He was only a private in a marching-regiment bound for Massaua; only one of the many pieces of throbbing flesh with which War builds up its arch of triumph.

And his place knew him no more; and no one remembered him except, now and then, his mother and grandmother, who, as they sat shivering over a little pot of charcoal in the long winter even-



ings, when the girls were away dancing at farmhouses, shook their heads together, and said to one another :

‘ How warm and well it was when Trottolino was here ! what big branches he used to bring down from the woods ! and always a merry tongue, and always a useful hand ! ’

When the next Easter-tide came round there was a fine wedding in the village under the hill. Gian il Morone espoused Biondina, and so splendid a bridal had not been seen in those parts for many a day. Both the father and the bridegroom were men who could spend, when they chose to open their purse-strings. Such eating and drinking, such dancing and singing, such uproar and gaiety, had never been as were now in the baker’s house in honour of his little daughter. It was mid-April, and all Nature seemed to rejoice with the red tulips and the blue irises, the wild roses, and the hawthorn in the hedges all blossoming all over the wide fields. Only the donkey was left hungry in his stable while the men feasted. And two women who had not been bidden to any feast thought sadly, as they dug up their patch of vegetable ground in front of their hut :

‘ The poor lad ! Not a thought of him, though once he was half-promised he should have the bridegroom’s place. Not a single thought of him ; and



the little blue-eyed doll is smirking, and blushing, and kissing, and making a fool of Black John, and thinking herself a fine lady, with the strings of pearls round her neck, and all the village wishing her joy !'

It was hard. It seemed very hard to Trottolino's mother and grandmother, as they painfully hoed the heavy black earth, and weeded the speedwell and vetch out from the rows of peas. It was the way of the world, no doubt ; but the way of the world is apt to seem hard to simple folk.

Some months later, when the green peas had long been gathered and sold, and the heat of the summer had been heavy on the earth, though the vines loved it, and flourished in its sultry dust, the miller who lived at the water-mill, and who was a kindly man, though rough and sarcastic in speech, walked down by the side of the stream one evening, when his wheel was at a standstill because the water was so low, and said to the two women working together as usual, hanging out linen on lines under the pear-trees :

' Say, wife, do ever you hear from your lad in Africa ? '

The women shook their heads.

They had heard nothing since March ; then he had written only a few lines, which had said that

it was hot as hell in those foreign parts, and he had been ill with fever. Ever since then, never a word. If only the king would please send him back! His father had been bedridden ever since that accident to his foot; it was thought it would end in gangrene; and the girls were giddy-paced wenches, good for naught; and the son left to them spent all he got on wine and tobacco at the village drinking-places; and the Lord only knew how things would end—two women could not keep the roof over their heads and find bread for everybody. Was there any way in which Trottolino could be got back? He had been away nigh on two years. And what would he say when he heard that Biondina had got married, and was big with child already?

The miller shook his head. He sometimes bought a newspaper; he had bought one in the town the previous day, and he had seen a story of Africa: of a forced march; of men gone mad from heat and thirst; of young soldiers shot by their officers; of others shot by their own hand to get out of their torture. There had been no names given, except those of two captains and some subalterns who were dead; but eighty-five privates were said to be killed or missing. And what he had read had made him think of one young lad who was in Africa, and come

down through the canes to ask if there had been of late any news of Trottolino. He said nothing of what he had seen or of what he feared to the two women, but went sadly to his home, where the mill-wheel was standing still in the blue evening shadows, the swallows and the bats wheeling above its waters. All the evening long he saw, in memory, the pretty, merry, brown face of Trottolino, with its blowing curls, and its laughing lips, and its gay eyes so wide open to the sunshine. All the evening long he seemed to hear the notes of the old mandoline, as it had used to sound above the muttering of the mill-water, and the trot of the little donkey's hoofs.

'A good lad, a happy lad, a useful lad!' thought the old man, as he sat in the porch smoking his last pipe before bedtime. 'And the fools send him to go mad, and rot like spoiled fruit, far away at the other end of the world. Tax, tax, tax! slaughter, slaughter, slaughter! that is the only tune they play to us; and we are such besotted asses that we turn our purses inside out, and give our boys to feed the carrion-birds to please them!'

And a few months later on, when the olives were being gathered, and the child of Biondina was being carried to the font, baptized in all its finery, and the old man, who had died of gangrene in the

foot, was being shuffled into a nameless hole under the rank grass where the poor were buried, they heard at last that Trottolino was dead. He had been dead many months—dead as the palm which Biondina had thrown out upon the dustheap a year before.

On that awful day of which the miller had read, under the brazen skies of Africa, in the drought, and the sand, and the thirst, and the plague of stinging insect-life, and the agony of blinded, festering eyes, he had dropped down as the patient camel drops when its last breath of life is passing; and one of his officers had yelled at him, and cursed him as a skulking cur, and when he had failed to obey, and rise, had shot him: the vultures, already gorged by blood, heavily floating above him, then settled slowly to their work.

His village talked of him a little while; not long, not much: he had been only a baker's lad.

But a simple, happy, useful life was gone for ever, and by its loss the world was so much the poorer. He had been blithe and harmless as a swallow in the April air, as a leveret in the fields of June: and the State had taken him, and jammed him under its iron heel, and crushed him into nothingness, body and soul.

And it is for this fate that women bring forth male children ; to this end that the people strain and travail, and are stripped of their hard-won earnings.

‘ War hath three daughters,’ said a great king once : ‘ Fire, and Blood, and Famine.’ And these three devour the nations, yet the nations crawl in the dust and kiss their feet !





THE BULLFINCH



## *THE BULLFINCH*

### A SKETCH

‘I WANT a black gown,’ said Lula.

She had set her heart on a black gown. She was a pretty, brown child, with bare feet, and bare head, and bare arms, nearly seventeen years old, and as saucy as a squirrel, and as agile as one. She lived at a little stone cottage at a place where four roads met. Her father was a road-mender : road-mending is hard work, and ill-paid ; but he was a cheery man, and did not complain.

The four roads were little traversed, except by shepherds with their flocks and herdsmen with their carts. Two were Roman-made roads, fine and durable, solid as a slab of rock ; two were quite youthful roads ; only about a hundred years old or so ; and these were ill-made and soft, and constantly breaking. These highways traversed a plain sown with wheat and planted with vines ; a vast plain, green or yellow or brown according to season, with a

low line of mountains visible many miles off, and, many miles farther still, in the opposite direction, a hazy, silvery line, which was said to be the sea.

Lula had never been farther than her feet could carry her on one of the four roads ; and she was seldom able to go as far as that, for she had everything to do at home, being the only female creature in the cottage. Her father and her two brothers were terrible hands at wearing out shirts and breeches. She spun, plaited, swept, cooked, sewed, kept the little garden in order, and attended to the pigs in the sty, the bees in the hive, and the fowls in the out-house ; she was a good little girl, who got up at dawn, and went to bed at night-fall ; but the day was never long enough for her.

She worked hard, and sang over her work, and had no nonsense in her little brain, because, happily for herself, she could not read a line. She could only keep her house tidy, and make her men comfortable ; which she did better than most of her compeers, because her mother had been a woman from the north, and had trained her in clean and wholesome ways.

The mother had been dead two years, but her lessons remained in Lula's heart and conscience.

She had all day long one little companion and



friend : a bullfinch, a *caponero* in the tongue of that province. He had been given to her when he was but a little nestling, and she had reared him, and educated him, and loved him dearly ; though he loved her more dearly still. His name was Zi-Zi, and he was four years old. He sang marvellously : she had taught him '*Nel silenzio della notte*,' and other songs of the peasantry, until he whistled them to perfection ; and he had, besides, many melodies of his own. Zi-Zi was the little Robin Goodfellow of the house, and his sweet piping could be heard far out into the fields. He was always free to come and go in and out of his cage, and even in and out of the house, as he chose ; he never went farther afield, and was the happiest little bird in all the cruel world of men. He would obey all she told him, and eat out of her hand and out of her lips ; he bustled and chirped about her all day long, and awaked her in the morning. The men were all fond of him, and her sweetheart often said, 'He is jealous of me, but I love him all the better for that.'

For Lula was betrothed. Her *damo* was a handsome fellow, who was a carter and a teamster, and lived at a big farm, miles away in the centre of the wide wheat-plains. His name was Hugo of the Caradori family, and his fame as a good fellow, a pretty

singer, and a brave ball player, was great in the country-side through which he drove his waggons of grain, with the huge horses in them which his masters had bought somewhere very far away, from France or Flanders, nobody knew which : however, wherever they came from, their solid limbs, their arched necks, and their vast stature made them seem like elephants or mammoths beside the lean little Friuli or Maremana horses in use in that district.

Lula was a very proud little girl when her young man came in sight, carolling lustily, with some carnations behind his ears, and pheasants' feathers and foxes' tails swinging at the ears of his team.

To and fro, backwards and forwards, along those long, level, white roads, from the broad grain-fields to the town lying out of sight under the blue haze in the far distance, Hugo and his horses travelled constantly with the waggon-loads of wheat or oats or straw ; and it was during these journeys that he and Lula had made, first acquaintance, and then courtship ; and the big team knew so well that little cottage by the meeting of the cross-roads, that they stopped of their own accord under the shadow of its one huge plane-tree.

Hugo was only a day-labourer, a carter at a weekly wage, which in this country is thought a

position very low down in the world ; but he was a fine fellow, and sober and industrious, and full of bright good humour.

‘The child will be poor ; but she is used to poverty, and she might do worse,’ said Lula’s father, in consenting to her betrothal. He himself would miss her terribly, he knew ; but one of his sons wanted to marry, and bring a woman into the house, so ‘the one thing slipped into the other, like a tool into its handle,’ said the good man ; and all was well.

Hugo had two breezy rooms over a great granary in which he lived, overlooking the cornfields, while the carthorses champed in their stalls below, and in summer the straw lay, like the waves of a yellow sea, tossed and heaped all about everywhere in the large stone court ; the child would be very well there, her father thought and said. So the marriage had been fixed to take place on All Saints’ Day ; a leisure-time with the teamster, for the roads were then bad, and the grain of the year had been by that date either stacked or sold.

Lula was very happy ; she was very fond of her handsome Hugo, and their loves were as playful and merry as those of two greenfinches in glad March weather amongst peach-blossoms and daffodils. Only one sorrow weighed heavily on Lula’s light little

heart: she wanted a black gown, wanted it so dreadfully; and she could not possibly ever get it. Not to be married in a black gown seems, to a Tuscan maiden, as terrible as it would seem to an English one not to be married in a white gown. Unless a Tuscan girl has a black gown to go to church in, she feels degraded, vulgar, unseemly; and a black gown was as high out of Lula's reach as the feather robes of Paradise.

A black gown of cashmere, properly made, and with some ruffles at the throat and the wrist, was the ideal of her innocent, childish soul. But under thirty francs—forty even, perhaps—such a gown was not to be had, and Lula might as well have wished for the Bands of Orion as for thirty francs. She and her people and her betrothed were all of them very poor, with scarcely means enough to fill the pot and the platter, and keep upon them decent, homely working-clothes. To save up enough to pay the priest's fees and the registry fees was the uttermost that her father and Hugo could manage to do between them.

As for a new gown, a cashmere gown, a black gown—whenever she ventured to speak of it her father and brothers told her, roughly, to stop such idle pining.

‘Hugo takes you without dower or necklace; be grateful to him,’ they said, angrily; for to be married when you cannot give with yourself some sort of dower, and a string of small pearls, is a disgrace: some dower, if only ten pounds, and some pearls, if only small as sago, are essential to every Tuscan bride, however poor.

The dower and the pearls she knew well she could never aspire to. But the black gown!—waking and sleeping, Lula dreamed of a black gown. It was oftener in her thoughts than Hugo was. The nearest and dearest friend she had, the daughter of a man as poor as her own father, had worn a black gown, the gift of a godmother, on her marriage at the last vintage-time. But Lula knew not even who her godmother had been, or whether she had ever had one. There was no chance of a fairy *comare* coming down from the skies to bring her what she sighed to possess.

To be wedded without a black gown is to be the laughing-stock, the by-word, the ridicule of all other women; it is a confession of the most abject poverty, the most complete misery; it is to fall at once from the ranks of the decent, respectable working-classes, into the naked, hungry rank of the hopelessly poor. Custom is law, says a Tuscan



proverb; and in no country is the individual so subjectly, entirely, and tremblingly the slave of custom. 'It is the habit of the country' is a fact beyond which there is no appeal for either high or low. Therefore, to be married without a black gown clouded all her happy days to Lula. To have to wear her russet-stuff Sunday gown, already patched and darned, on her wedding-day, was humiliation unspeakable. But there was no help for it.

'Black gown? Go to, you little jade!' said her father; how should they get bridal clothes, when they could scarcely get bread and oil to eat?

Thirty francs was to them a sum as enormous and unattainable as if it had been thirty millions.

There are pedlars who come out to those lonely rural peasants; pedlars who walk, or at most have a donkey to drag their long, light cart, filled with rolls and bales of wearing apparel. They are the miniature Mephistopheles, the petty Mercadets of the country-side; women are tempted by the smartness and apparent cheapness of their wares, and run into debt to these ambulant vendors, and never get out of it, and cheat their fathers, and husbands, and brothers, and lovers in consequence. Lula's innocence and honesty would not, probably, have been more proof against this kind of temptation than were those of

others ; but no pedlar would sell to her on credit. With the daughters and wives of the peasants it was different : there was a farm more or less rich behind them ; they could save on the sly from eggs, or milk, or fruit ; they could give the salesmen drinks of good wine, slices of good *polenta*, plates of warm soup. But Lula was too poor to do this ; and the pedlar, who had a black cashmere on his cart, showed it to her, and expatiated on it, and tortured her with the sight of it, but tucked it up in his box again.

‘ *Senza soldi mai !* ’ he said, ruthlessly : without money down, never should a square inch of it be hers.

If she had been going to marry a well-to-do man, then, indeed, he might have let her have it, and the bridegroom might have paid for it afterwards. But the pedlar, whose business it was to know all about everybody, knew that Hugo the carter was as poor as Job, with no riches present or prospective, except his youth, and his health, and his strength.

So ‘ *Senza soldi mai,* ’ he said, sternly, shutting up the gown-stuff in the wooden box with the big padlock which contained his choicest goods.

And Lula sobbed as if her heart would break as she saw the donkey-cart wind its slow way along one of the roads between the fallow-fields, where the corn

had long been reaped, and the grass was springing in the furrows ; for it was nearly October, and if the cashmere gown could not be bought and made very quickly, All Saints' Day would have already dawned, and she would have to go to church in her common, russet, patched frock.

The pedlar went plodding on in the dust under the ripe grapes of the vines which bordered the road, and all her hopes went with him.

'He might have let me have it; I would have surely paid him some time,' she thought, with that happy-go-lucky trust in the friendliness of Fortune which makes so much of the misery of the improvident poor.

Suddenly the donkey stopped, the cart turned, and the pedlar came back slowly through the sunshine. Lula's heart flew high as heaven as she stood under the plane-tree, and her tears ceased. He was coming to offer it to her, she was sure. She ran to meet him, with hot cheeks, and eyes dancing through her tears.

'You are going to give it me, dear Pietro?' she said, caressingly. 'Oh, do give it me, and I will never eat a mouthful till I pay you!'

'*Che!*' said the pedlar, with scorn for her simplicity. 'I must see the notes in my hand before I

give it you. You are a pretty girl, and a good one, and I am very fond of you ; but business is business, and money is money. However, I came back to tell you that there is a way, now I think of it, by which you might make the money, and no trouble to you, either.'

'Nothing dishonest?' asked Lula, beginning to tremble.

'No, no, bless your soul! I am not a bad man, am I? Pietro likes money; Pietro never denies it; but Pietro is as pure as asses' milk—not a drop of poison ever in him.'

'But what can I do?' said Lula, impatiently cutting short his pæan of self-admiration, which would otherwise have scarcely ended at broad noon.

'What a lass you are to bite one's nose off!' said Pietro. 'Well, you can sell Zi-Zi.'

'Sell Zi-Zi!'

Lula stared, with her black eyes grown round as moons.

'Why, who would buy him? A little common-bird, a mere wild black-cap!'

'A black cap for a black gown,' said the old pedlar with a chuckle; 'a rare proper exchange, eh? Rhymes like a *fioretta*. Well, it so happens that I know a lady who asked me to get her a piping black-

cap, and your Zi-Zi has a rare pipe of his own. She is a foreigner. Foreigners are always crack-pates. They buy all the rubbish we show them. Give me Zi-Zi, and I will take him to her to-morrow, and try and get her to give as much as you want for the gown.'

'Sell Zi-Zi?' repeated Lula, stupidly.

The little bird, hearing his name thus repeated, flew out of the house, and circled round her head, and fluttered and chirruped, and then, with a flash of his wings in the sunlight, darted up over the plane-leaves, and there broke into sweetest song.

'Oh, I could not sell Zi-Zi!' she murmured, with a pale, scared face. 'I could not, I could not!—and Hugo is so fond of him!'

'Just as you please,' said the pedlar; 'I only wished to please you. For myself, I would sooner keep the cashmere, for I shall want it for the Rossi's Amalia's wedding, and it is a beautiful, rare piece of goods. Only, do not ever say again that Pietro would not do you a good turn when he had the chance. Pietro has a heart of gold.'

Then he pulled cruelly at his donkey's mouth, and turned round the cart once more. Zi-Zi, above the plane-leaves, was pouring out the *Nel silenzio della notte*, in a flood of exquisite silvery melody.



The pedlar had only come up so far out of his way that morning because he had had for several weeks a commission to buy a piping bullfinch and had found none in good voice or well-trained anywhere, and so had remembered Lula's Zi-Zi, and had gone this roundabout way to work because no Italian ever takes a straight road if he can find a devious one. He meant to get fifty, sixty, perhaps seventy francs from the foreigner whose pate was cracked; and if he then sold the cashmere into the bargain, even if he had to part with thirty francs as Zi-Zi's price, he would make a good day's work out of it, such as was sweet to his peddling soul.

‘Wait a moment—wait,’ cried Lula, breathlessly.

And she was very pale, and kept glancing upward at the little singing-bird, as though he could know his fate was in the balance.

‘Would he be happy, do you think?’ she said, in a low, shamed voice.

‘Stuff and nonsense!’ replied Pietro, with boundless contempt: ‘birds are happy anywhere, if that matters, and where he’d go is a palace, with fountains, and flowers, and fine glass places and a power of silver and of gold everywhere. Happy!—Lord, if he sing one tune here, he’ll sing twenty there. Catch him, and give him to me. And here’s the cashmere all at once,

my dear ; beautiful, rare stuff, given away for a song.'

'Oh, I can't, I can't !' she muttered, shrinking away from the cart, as the flood of the little bird's song poured through the sunlit air. 'I'll never be at peace again if I sell Zi-Zi ; and why should any one ever buy him for all that money, a little common bird ?'

She was doubtful, suspicious, ashamed, envious, tortured ; she longed passionately for the gown, but her heart was warm, and she loved Zi-Zi ; moreover, she was stupefied and incredulous. She knew nothing of foreigners, or rich people, and their fancies ; it seemed to her utterly impossible that anyone could give such an enormous sum for one little tiny bird, that would be sold for a farthing to stick on a spit.

The pedlar thrust the cashmere upon her ; but she was suspicious, and, though her whole soul was pining for it, would not take it so.

'You would declare afterwards that I was in debt for it,' she said, rudely, to the old man, who raised his hands to heaven in horror at such a foul aspersion.

And she would not believe him, nor accept the stuff, nor give the bird.

Poor little Zi-Zi, all the while unconscious of

the conspiracy against him, was singing his little heart out of his body in his joy at the sunbeams, and the leaves, and the blue sky, and the answering notes of some woodlarks flying through the vines. It was their season of the year to sing, and was not his. But that did not matter to Zi-Zi; he sang, more or less, all the year through, whenever he heard his mistress's voice or laughter.

The pedlar got very angry: he swore, and bullied, and compelled, and cajoled, and flattered; and the black cashmere lay all the while spread out on the lid of the box, with some white cotton lace which was generously to be given in with it.

‘I am ruining myself,’ he declared. ‘But it is all for love of you, and to keep my promise to the lady to take her a blackcap. And then you, you ungrateful, graceless, disbelieving, stony-hearted little jade, go and say that I am lying, and that I have some hidden interest of my own to serve!’

‘I only say I’ll see where Zi-Zi goes, if I let him go,’ said Lula.

And her voice was dogged and low, with a sound as of shame in it.

‘Then I’ll take you,’ said Pietro, with fury and reluctance, seeing all his hoped-for gains gliding away from him into the haze of uncertainty.

‘ Then I’ll take you, Lula, daughter of Gian ; I’ll take you, and you may get what you can ; but I’ll never let you have that cashmere—never, so help me Heaven ! That ever a sixteen-year-old wench, who I nursed on my knee as a babe, should doubt the honest word of her friend, her best friend, her oldest friend ! Ah ! it is women are vile, core through ; and Pietro is a fool, a thrice-accursed fool, to wear his aged bones out in serving them ! The girl’s dying for the gown, and I remember a foreigner’s whim to serve her, and I put her in the way of getting a fine wedding-dress, lace and all, for nothing, and she won’t give up a little hedge dickey-bird that is only fit to be ate in a mouthful of pastry ! ’

And so eloquently did he talk, and so greatly did he magnify his benevolence, and so craftily did he appeal to her self-love and her vanity, and so completely did he confuse her mind and fan the heat of her greed, that after two hours’ excited dispute, both of them talking hard one against another, with the donkey standing asleep in the sun, and the cashmere lying outspread on the cart, Lula, ashamed of what she did, with a feeling of guilt and a loud-throbbing heart, afraid lest the very stones in the road should hear her, said, in a hoarse, abashed whisper :

‘ Well, I’ll give him, then, if you’re sure he’ll be

happy, and if you'll throw me those three yards of ribbon in with the gown.'

'What a wench!' groaned the pedlar, half in horror of the cunning of this lass, half in admiring homage of her shrewdness. 'To think she was a babe at the breast a summer or two ago, and now would talk the very heart out of a poor, harmless, trustful old man like Pietro, and leave him penniless, to please her, on his dying bed!'

But, despite his torrents of reproaches and regrets, he was quick to secure his bargain; he made up the cashmere, and the lace, and the ribbon for trimming, into a parcel, and wrote out on an atom of yellow paper a clear receipt for all of them, as of 'value received' for all; and then, with his hand laid firmly upon them, he said to her:

'Now give me Zi-Zi in his cage, and all these beautiful things are your own. Make haste, for I've got far to go with him; very far; and I've lost all the morning here.'

Lula had a blanched, frightened look, as of guilt, on her face; her ruddy lips had grown quite colourless, and trembled.

'You're sure he'll be loose where he goes?' she whispered.

'Loose!' said the pedlar, roughly; 'loose, yes!



He'll fly about all day long among the fountains and the flowers. Come, look sharp, and get him into the cage! I can't waste all the day here.'

Zi-Zi, who had been darting hither and thither, taking a drop of water out of a pan, snatching an atom of thistledown off a plant, searching for a belated caterpillar under the leaves, but always keeping one little bright black eye fixed on Lula, was now perched on the sill of the casement, sending out all manner of sweet trills and triplets and liquid roulades, a linnet answering him from a thicket of rose-bushes.

'Zi-Zi! Zi-Zi!' called Lula.

'Zi!' said the little bird, in joyous and confident response.

He flew up from the window-sill on to her shoulder, and pecked, in his pretty, caressing way, at the rosy tip of her little brown ear.

'*Va cuccia*, Zi-Zi!' she said, in a faint, hoarse voice.

It was her good-night word of command, it was the order to go to bed; and Zi-Zi could not understand it at that hour of bright midday, with the broad sun shining in the zenith, and his friends, the linnets and the woodlarks, in full sport and song.

'*Va cuccia!*' said Lula, more sharply.

And then the little bird, knowing she was in earnest, and sorrowfully supposing that he was some way in fault, sadly left his loved place upon her shoulder, and flew, slowly and reluctantly, to the cottage, and entered the little rusty cage which served him as a sleeping-place, and of which the door stood open day and night.

‘Zi-Zi!’ he chirped, as he flew to his perch, with a melancholy protest and reproach in the notes.

What had Zi-Zi done that he was punished?

‘Take him!’ said the girl, savagely.

Then she buried her face in her hands not to see.

The pedlar went indoors, reached down the cage, closed the little wire wicket, and covered the cage with an old bit of calico. Then he set it on the cart, and laid the cashmere, the ribbon, and the receipt, down on the bench under the plane-tree.

‘There they all are, my dear. You’ll never have such another friend as Pietro in all your days, and when you get a baby next year, Pietro will stand for him at the font,’ he said, with fatherly tenderness.

Then he shook the donkey awake, and the little rusty wheels of the cart began to turn and creak.

‘Zi-Zi! Zi-Zi!’ came plaintively and uneasily from the covered cage, in tremulous, oft-repeated notes, all its music gone, and a hoarse appeal and terror in the

little shrill voice. Lula stood with her face buried in her hands; she could not bear to see, she could not bear to hear; sobs shook her frame from head to foot. She had bartered love for money.

The cart soon passed out of view through the sunshine, over the white dust.

The linnets and woodlarks were all chirping, the bees were humming, the pigeons were cooing: but to Lula it seemed as though a great silence and desolation had fallen on the place.

Little Zi-Zi was going away—away—away—she did not even know where. She felt as if she had killed some little innocent thing. There were the black cashmere, the lace, the ribbon, everything she had desired so passionately for so many months: she would go to her wedding in fine, new, wedding-garments, and they had cost her nothing; and she tried to be glad, tried to laugh, and look at the stuff, and think of how bravely she would appear at the church in the eyes of the other girls. But it was of no use; she could not see her treasures for the tears that rained from her eyes, and she knew that she had done a greedy, a mean, and a cruel thing.

Thrice she started from her seat to run after and overtake the pedlar's cart, which she could have done, for she was fleet of foot, and knew his route. But

each time she sat down again, overcome by the false shame of looking foolish in the old man's eyes, and by the longing, still in her, to be suitably arrayed upon her marriage-day.

She had the desire of her soul; but she was wretched.

'Zi-Zi! Oh, Zi-Zi!' she moaned.

There she sat alone in the sunshine, where never more would the little red-breasted, black-capped, merry, devoted friend, flutter and twitter about her under the leaves.

'What have you done with Zi-Zi?' asked her father when he came home.

And when she told him, he was silent. But one of her brothers said, roughly:

'Was there ever aught like a woman for loving herself? Hang me if I would have sold little Zi-Zi! no, not to have tobacco and wine all the year round for nothing!'

'A black cap for a black gown,' said the younger lad, making the same poor joke that the pedlar had made. 'Well, we'll never hear a bird whistle as Zi-Zi whistled; I could hear his note half-a-mile off, and I'd swear to it out of ten thousand.'

And Lula knew that they all of them condemned her.

She could not bear to look at the old oak chest upon which his cage had used to stand.

That evening Hugo walked over from the Grange, where he lived, and glanced at the chest, where Zi-Zi at that hour was always to be seen, a little ball of russet plumage, at roost on his perch. He missed the cage.

‘Have you lost the little bird?’ he inquired anxiously.

Lula shook her head, with the tears gathering afresh in her eyes; her voice failed her.

‘She’s sold him to get her black dress,’ said her father, gruffly. ‘Of course, it’s right, and well enough, he was her own; but I feel as if the luck of the house had gone with little Zi-Zi.’

‘Sold him? Who would buy him at any price high enough to get a gown?’ said Hugo, in astonishment.

‘Some foreigner; foreigners are always three-parts daft,’ said the older man, impatiently. ‘Sure as you live, my mother sold an old battered pan to one of them; it had always served for the pigeons’ water, and nobody thought naught of it, and the foreigner paid for it ten times its weight in gold because of somebody who, he said, had modelled it: they are



always picking up dirt like that; they don't know any better.'

'What did you get for Zi-Zi?' Hugo inquired, turning to his betrothed.

But she threw her apron over her head, and got up from the table, and ran away into the open air and the evening shadows.

'She got her black gown,' said her father. 'I wouldn't have done it myself to get a black coat, or twenty black coats. But, Lord! you know what women are when they have a bit of finery in their heads. They'd sell themselves, and all belonging to 'em.'

'I will get her another bird,' said Hugo. 'But I am sorry.'

'I think the luck of the house is gone with Zi-Zi,' said the old man; 'and you may be sure that mean rogue, Pietro, has made a rare profit on it. If the child had waited till one of us had come in, 'twould have been better.'

'Ay, it would; we could have gone with him, and seen what he did get. To give a whole gown for a little blackcap!—saints above us!—and he isn't a man to give anything without getting three times as much again for himself.'

The discovery that a gold-mine had been with

them in the tiny form of the little bullfinch stupefied all the men; these pretty songsters were netted, or shot, or bird-limed all around them, only to furnish a mouthful at a feast-day meal. They knew nothing of rich people and their fancies, and the prices which were paid for well-trained birds in full song.

‘Anyhow, I am sorry the little chap is gone,’ said Hugo, as he looked again at the empty cage. ‘I always thought he’d bring us luck. I heard him piping the first time I stopped my beasts by these cross-roads, and saw Lula’s face in the doorway.’

And then he went outside the house, and tried to console Lula, who was sitting on the bench, crying still, as if her heart would break.

But she had her black gown, and had to make it, and it took up all her leisure, and some of her working-hours: so that, for the first time in her short life, the bread she baked was heavy, and the cottage was ill-swept, and the cabbage soup simmered itself all away, and when the men came home nothing was ready for them.

‘The devil take your gown!’ said her father more than once. ‘It’s been ill got, and it’s played the deuce with you!’

If the cashmere gown had only been rolls of bank-notes, and if she had only known whither the

bird was gone, so great was her remorse, that she would have taken the money, and begged for Zi-Zi back again. But to do this was impossible: in her haste and confusion, in her greed and regret, she had not thought to make the pedlar tell her where those rich folks dwelt: perhaps at some villa on the plains, perhaps in some one of the little towns, perhaps in the city itself, of which, on fine days, she could see the crosses on the cathedral domes shining in the blue haze under those far-off mountains. She could not tell; in her haste to possess the black gown she had let her little friend pass away from her into the vast unknown, and she could not trace him.

As she sat and stitched at the woollen stuff, of which the dye blackened her fingers, and the folds fell about her like a funeral pall, she could not bear to see the thrushes flying amongst the vines, and hear the autumn singing-birds chirp and warble in the fields. It was so like Zi-Zi, and yet so unlike. And then, when morning dawned, there was no little twitter at her ear to wake her, no tapping against the window-glass to greet the sunrise.

‘I wish, dear, you’d gone without the gown,’ said Hugo. ‘I should have liked little Zi-Zi always singing about my place: it is a poor place—he’d have made it bright.’

‘We can get other birds,’ said Lula, quickly and crossly.

She could not bring herself to confess that she regretted what she had done, and that the memory of the little songster was always with her, haunting her restlessly, ceaselessly, darkening into what was almost remorse the days of her betrothal-time, which should have been so blithe and cloudless.

In a fortnight from the day of his sale the wedding-gown was finished, made very stiff with whale-bone and buckram, and disfiguring the slim, supple, child-like figure of her very greatly, and suiting ill her round, cherubic face, and her tanned and rosy skin.

But it was a black gown, the garment which custom required, and she was proud to think that everybody who had ever known her in her short life would see her arrayed in it. And yet she hated the sight of it where it lay in the chest with some powdered iris-root to sweeten it, and the blessed palm of the past Easter laid upon it to bring it good fortune.

Once she walked to where old Pietro lived; it was a dusty, ugly little village, several miles off, and she was tired when she got to it, and the old man was out on his rounds, and was not expected back for two

days. No one could tell her anything about the bird, but some women of the house he lodged at said he had seemed flush of money that week. Lula went home with a heavy heart.

‘I will get you another bullfinch to-morrow, my girl,’ said Hugo, with his arm about her, under the porch.

‘No, not another—never another,’ said Lula, passionately. ‘He loved me—oh! he did love me, Hugo. I was a wicked wretch, a vain fool, to send him away to get my gown. But I could not bear the women to laugh at me, and see me go to the church with you in a shabby old frock!’

‘The frock did not matter,’ said Hugo. ‘But don’t sob so about it. I dare say the little bird will be as merry there as he was here; they must be rich folk who have got him, or they would not have paid such a sight of money for a mere whim. Cheer up, my lass.’

But Lula was not to be comforted; the sense of some crime committed, some treachery done, weighed on her wherever she was.

She knew that her sweetheart was right, and that it would have been better to have gone without the gown.

The day she had put the last stitch to it, and



laid it there, with the palm and the iris powder, was a fine, sunshiny vintage-day: the grapes were being gathered all over the plain, and the laughter of the boys and girls, and the creak of the waggon wheels, and now and then the glad bark of a dog, came to her from the fields. For the first time in her life she was not out under the vines, pulling down the bunches, skipping, laughing, wrestling, playing with the rest under the maple-boughs and the vine-leaves. She was alone with her black gown, troubled and anxious because one of the girls who lived nearer the town had told her that she had cut the waist too long, and the skirt too full, to be like what they now wore in the streets.

Suddenly she heard a voice which called her name; it was that of Pietro, the pedlar.

She started and sighed as she heard it; it was hateful to her.

‘What can he want with me?’ she wondered: ‘he gave me a clear receipt in full; he cannot come for any money.’

But apprehensive, perplexed, and reluctant, she went out of the doorway, and saw the old man and his cart, just as she had seen them fifteen days before, when she had sold Zi-Zi, only in the shafts of the cart there was a dappled-grey pony.

‘Lula, will you come along with me?’ said the

pedlar. 'The rich folks who bought Zi-Zi want you.'

All the blood in her body seemed to leap into Lula's face.

'Oh, my Zi-Zi! oh, my Zi-Zi!' she cried, with a deep sob. 'Is he well? Is he happy?'

'Oh ay,' said the old man, hastily. 'But—but he won't sing, and nothing will do for the lady that has him but to fetch you, and see if you can make him sing. You'll come, won't you? Of course, I have been paid for him, and it doesn't matter to me; but Pietro is always a man of honour, and having sold him for a singing-bird, a piping blackcap, why you see——'

'Oh! I knew he would be wretched,' said Lula, with a wailing cry. 'How I hate you—how I hate you! Oh, why did I listen to you, and take your stuff that day? It is half cotton, and dyed so badly, and is so coarse, not the least like, they tell me, what they wear in the town.'

'You are an ungrateful hussy,' said the old man, 'and I have a mind to drag the brass earrings out of your ears. If you are so fond of your Zi-Zi, come and see him, and get him to sing.'

'But is it very far? You would not tell me where.'

‘It is ten miles off. But I’ve said I’ll take you, and I’ll take you. Pietro’s word is his bond.’

‘But my father?——’

‘I passed your father on the road, and I told him I was coming for you. Throw a shawl about your head, and get up beside me—quick!’

‘Is Zi-Zi ill?’

‘Well, he is not over well. You’ll cure him if you come.’

Lula sprang into the cart. Her heart was sick, and her conscience was heavy-laden.

Pietro banged on to the grey pony with a heavy stick, and it started off at a quick pace; they rolled over the stones and the dust, under the reddening leaves of the pollard maples. The pedlar never spoke a word; he was full of apprehension lest Lula should learn that he had received no less than eighty francs for poor Zi-Zi. But he had had no choice but to seek her out, for the servants of the great foreign house had threatened him with breaking every bone in his body if he did not fetch the girl, and make the bird sing.

Zi-Zi, when he had first been released from darkness, and saw the light, the flowers, and the fountains around him, had burst into a flood of song, rapturous and far reaching; so that the lady, who had set her

heart on possessing a piping bullfinch, had said hastily to the people :

‘Pay the man who brought him anything he asks, and let him go.’

But, that one song ended, Zi-Zi had sung no more, he had broken off in the midst of the *Nel silenzio*, and, looking uneasily about him, had called ‘Zi-Zi ! Zi-Zi !’ with agitation, and realised that he was in a strange place, and that she whom he loved was not near him.

They had never been able to induce him to sing again, and day by day he had pined and drooped, a little more, and a little more. The lady had accused the servants of tampering with him ; the servants had sought out the pedlar and said to him :

‘Make the bird sing as he sang when he came, or we will make you disgorge every farthing you received.’

‘I can’t make him sing,’ the old man had answered angrily. ‘’Tis only the girl who reared him that can do that.’

‘Well, bring the girl,’ the servants had said ; and so he had come, borrowing a stout pony to put in the shafts instead of his feeble donkey, for the way was long between the cottage at the cross-roads and the great house.

He was angered and apprehensive. He had gained eighty francs by Zi-Zi, and he could not be sure that when the girl should speak with the servants this fact would not come out against himself.

The drive was long and tedious, and frightened her: she had never been so far out over the plains in her life. She did not know where she was, and she was afraid of the crafty, ugly old man, whose usual loquacity was stilled, and who only grumbled a few bad words every now and then when a wheel sank into a rut or jolted over a stone in the road.

Pietro was thinking all the time: 'If she should find out I had eighty francs?'

But one fear casts out another, and the servant who had paid him in the lady's name had said to him: 'If your bird does not sing, I will break every bone in your old yellow skin!'

So he had sought for Lula.

The pony soon tired of trotting, and jogged slowly on through the sunshiny width of the plains, all green and golden with vines, and passed farms, and villages, and churches, and wooded places, and at last drew near a great house in the midst of great gardens, such as Lula had never dreamed could be so near her, and yet so far from her.



Her heart beat quickly, with terror and relief: Pietro had done her no harm, but she was brought into a strange and terrifying place.

‘Oh, my Zi-Zi, my Zi-Zi!’ she murmured, with a lump in her throat.

They went through avenues, and past fishponds, and under terraces, and the scene was gorgeous and amazing to the ignorance of the girl, and a great shyness and a frost of fear came on her, and her tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of her mouth, and her heart felt cold as ice.

She was confused, and hardly sensible of what she did or where they took her, when she got down alone before a vast, white, shining house, and was led by a lackey through a succession of rooms such as she had never dreamed of in her visions of Paradise, and which she saw, in a whirl of strange colours, dancing and swaying before her eyes.

At the end of the rooms was a glass house, full of flowering-trees, with a fountain playing in their midst; and a voice said to her:

‘There is your bird. Make him sing. He has never sung for us.’

Then she saw, amongst many-hued flowers of strange shape, a golden cage, or one which looked of gold to her; and on the perch of it sat, huddled

up, a little ball of feathers, with its small, black head sunk down into its breast-feathers.

With a shrill cry Lula sprang forwards to it and opened the door of the cage.

‘Zi-Zi!’ she cried. ‘He is dying! Oh, he is dying! Zi-Zi! Zi-Zi! don’t you know Lula, Zi-Zi?’

The little bird lifted his drooping head, and a tremor ran through him like a sigh: his dulled eyes brightened, his wings fluttered, he flew out of the cage and lit on the girl’s shoulder.

‘My Zi-Zi! Oh, my Zi-Zi!’ she cried, with the tears coursing down her cheeks.

‘Make him sing,’ said the voices round her.

She took him in her hand, and he fluttered to her lips, and pecked at them with joy, his wings outstretched and trembling in a passion of ecstasy.

Then his little black head fell back, his feathers drooped, motionless, his eyes clouded—he would never sing any more.

His little heart had broken under the burden of its ill-requited love.

---

The black gown which had cost his life was worn on Lula’s wedding-day; and it was worn once more,

a year later, when she died in childbirth, and they dressed her in it as in a shroud.

They laid her in the common ground, which every few years is emptied of its bones, and filled afresh with newer dead.

In the shadows of the summer evenings a little bird is often seen fluttering above the nameless cross of wood, which alone marks her burial-place.

‘It is Zi-Zi!’ say the country people, with hushed breath.









June, 1890.



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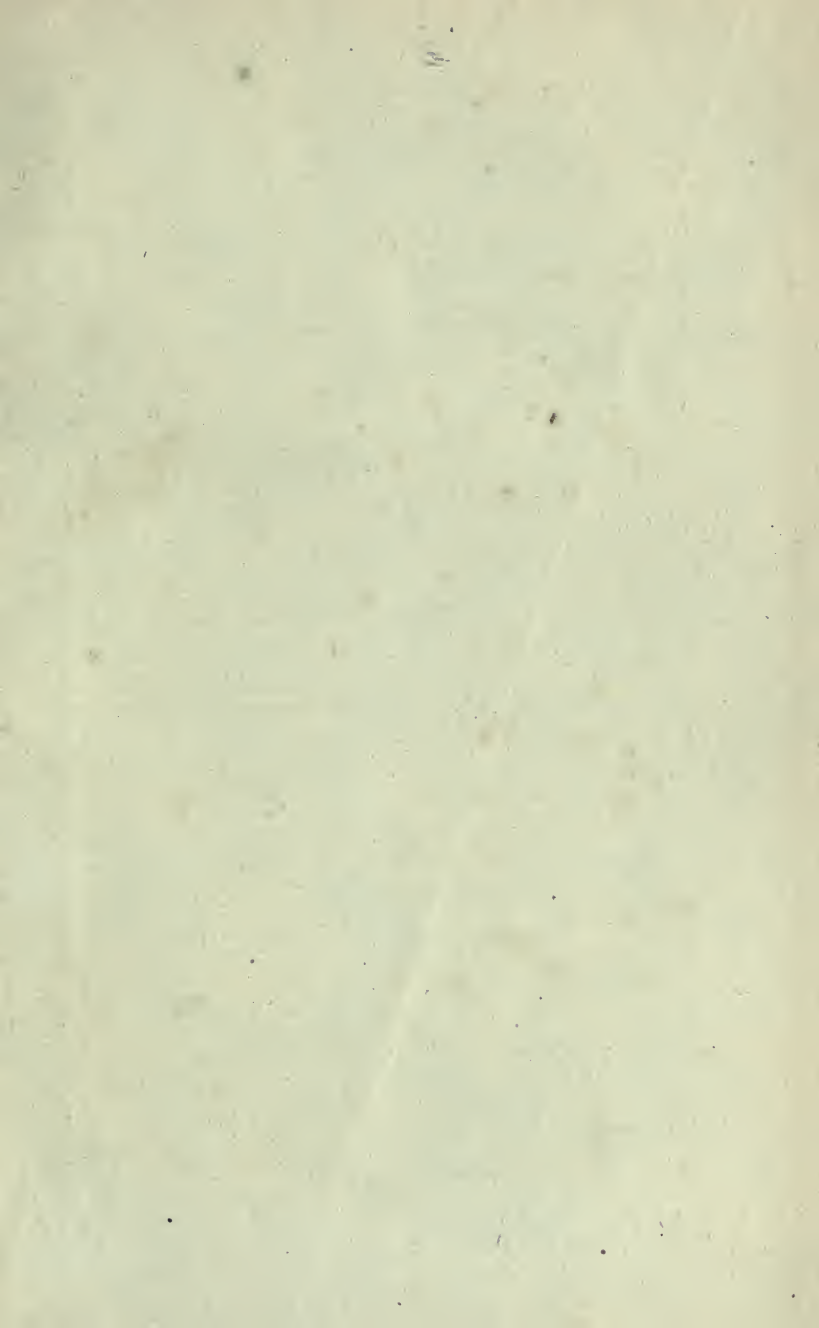
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